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THE SILKEN LASSO; or, The Rose of Ranch Robin.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "ARKANSAW," "BILL BRAVO," "BUCKSKIN DETECTIVE," "COOL SAM AND PARD," ETC., ETC.



"TONGUELESS! BY HEAVENS! BUT YOU CAN WRITE, CHIQUE. YOUR HAND MUST SPEAK! IT WILL SEND ME AND MY SILKEN LASSO TO THE TRAIL OF VENGEANCE."

The Silken Lasso ;

OR,

The Rose of Ranch Robin.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "ARKANSAW," "BILL BRAVO,"
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PARD," "DYNAMITE DAN," "VELVET
FOOT," "CAPTAIN CUTLASS,"
"ROUGH ROB," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WORK OF FIENDS.

It was the early morning of a summer day, and a single horseman was cantering through the luxuriant grama grass that clothed one of the many beautiful valleys that lie between the Mogollon Mountains and the Colorado Chiquito, in Arizona.

The horse was a magnificent animal with a sleek skin, and as black as a coal, and the man was a well-built personage, still under thirty-five; his dress was not unlike that of the *vagabundo*—an open jacket richly embroidered, and rather wide pantaloons slashed almost to the knees.

His hat was of the sombrero cut, a hat often seen in that country, and on this occasion the front brim was thrown back, displaying a face rather fair and adorned with a mustache as black as the skin of the horse he rode.

This man had a pair of piercing black eyes, and they saw everything as he rode along.

"They don't look for me, but I'll be welcome all the same," he mused to himself. "I haven't seen the ranch and its inmates for six months, and they must have wondered what's become of me. I've got something for you, my Chiquito Rose, and a 'pointer' about five hundred boss cattle for you, Rolfo."

The speaker had a pleasant voice, and his black eyes seemed to sparkle with pleasure at the thought of the joy his arrival at a certain well-known ranch would cause.

Five minutes later the keen eyes of the man caught sight of something they had not seen before; they saw far away dark objects floating against the soft blue skies, which seemed to touch the loftiest peaks of the Mogollon Mountains, but well did he know that the floating specks were between him and the high hills, and that they were, in reality, the gigantic vultures of the Southwest country.

Of course he had seen them before, but as he urged his steed forward, he kept his eyes fixed on the birds which he knew hovered over some carrion feast, miles from the soft grass that bent under the hoofs of his horse.

"Forward, Swiftfoot," he said as he touched the animal lightly with the steel spur buckled to his right foot. "I don't like the looks of those rascally vultures. Next to the thieving Apaches, I hate them, and more than once have I told them so with lasso and revolver."

Urged forward by the spur, the horse increased his gait, and was soon bearing his rider swiftly across the valley. The wind that prevailed kept the sombrero lifted in front, waved the long hairs of the man's mustache, and played with the silken ribbons that adorned the long black lasso hanging from the saddle-bow.

Not for a moment did he take his eyes from the soaring scavengers of the air; the huge birds seemed to fascinate him in a singular manner.

All at once he drew rein on the summit of a little rise to which he had urged his faithful steed.

"My God! the red fiends have been ahead of me!" he cried, starting back from the scene before him. "Why did I stop in Tucson when I was needed here? Why was I detained there when help was wanted at Ranch Robin? I've come too late to help, but not too late, by the eternal! to hunt somebody down for this!"

Down the declivity dashed the horse, his feet scarcely touching the ground beneath them and the man in the saddle had now a pair of vengeful eyes.

The vultures were now almost directly overhead, and he had seen at a glance that something terrible had summoned them to that part of the country.

Before him, and stretching from the base of the rise, lay one of the most beautiful ranches in the country of the Colorado. Beautiful! There had been a time, and not far remote, either, when Ranch Robin, as the ranch was

called, was a place of surpassing loveliness; but now it lay desolate before the man's eyes, its grass fire swept, its buildings in ashes, and over all that awful desolation caused by torch and Indian fury.

"As my name's Black-Horse Steve, the doers of this shall suffer!" cried the man as he approached the spot where the building of Ranch Robin had stood. "They don't know the Mounted Mystery of Arizona, as they shall for this demon work. Aha! I've not yet parted company with Swiftfoot and the Silken Lasso!"

It did not take Steve of the sable steed long to reach the spot toward which he guided his horse, and he soon drew rein amidst a scene of desolation which pen cannot adequately describe.

The home of Rolfo, the proprietor of Ranch Robin, was in ruins, not a building stood to shelter the smallest animal; the picturesque dwelling, with its long porch on the sunny side, was gone, and the walks that led to the flower garden were strewn with blackened cinders.

Black-Horse Steve grated his teeth as he sat like a statue in the saddle, and beheld this scene, to which he had come too late; he had reached the spot after the work was done and the marauders had departed, and again he cursed the men who had detained him three days in Tucson.

"Hello! one of the dogs left, eh?" suddenly cried Steve, catching sight of an object moving among the bushes of the garden near the house. "No! by my life! 'tis a human being! I will know now who did this, and I'll be on the trail before an hour!"

The Arizonian did not wait for the person described to approach him, but sprang from the saddle and ran forward.

Sure enough, it was a man and not a dog, creeping from among the bushes, and the man of the sable steed was soon bending over a half-breed cattle-herder, and, as he well knew, one of the most trusted *attaches* of Ranch Robin.

"For God's sake, Chique, who did this, and whar are Rolfo and the Rose?" he cried.

The herder who was too weak to rise looked up from the ground into Steve's face, but made no reply.

"Can't you talk? They didn't take your tongue, did they?"

Chique groaned and lifted his hand to his mouth. Black-Horse Steve stooped still lower to catch what he thought would be a whisper, but instead, the herder opened his mouth and disclosed a sight horrible enough to make the most resolute recoil.

A wild exclamation parted the Arizonian's lips.

"Tongueless! by heavens! But you can write, Chique. Your hand *must* speak! It shall send me and my silken lasso to the trail of vengeance. You know who did this, for you were here! Answer me, quick! Tell me who came like wolves in the night; tell me where Rolfo and the girl are? Here! I have a pencil! I am never without one, you know. I have paper, too. Write enough to tell whom I must hunt. One sentence may be enough. You haven't got long to live, Chique. Heaven has prolonged your life till I came. Now, write!"

While he spoke, Black-Horse Steve had thrust a pencil into the herder's hand, and was holding before him a piece of paper with a small note-book for a desk.

The mutilated man knew what was wanted, and a strange light gleamed in his eyes as his fingers closed on the pencil, and he started toward the paper. But all at once he hesitated and looked up at the breathless man.

"What! won't you tell me, Chique?" cried Steve. "They cut your tongue out; they left you to die by starvation whar you have always had plenty! I will find Rolfo and the Chiquito Rose. I will *avenge* you!"

The last words started the herder's hand toward the paper again. Vengeance! Yes, that is what he wanted; vengeance for the tongue which had been cut off!

Black-Horse Steve saw the pencil move across the paper, and he held his breath as the tongueless herder wrote with an effort two brief, but appalling sentences.

"It was done three nights ago. Four Apaches and two white men dressed like Indians!"

That was all.

The pencil dropped from Chique's hand at the end of the last word, and Steve snatched up the paper and read it aloud.

"Only six, Chique?" he exclaimed, looking down at the herder.

A look said "only six."

"Which way did they go?"

The herder shook his head.

"Ah! I know! You had lost your tongue and were unconscious when the devils left," Steve said. "Did they kill Rolfo? Did they insult the girl?"

There was no answer of any sort, for Chique's eyes suddenly rolled in a wild manner, and he fell back.

"You *must* tell me something more, Chique!" cried the Arizonian. "I cannot afford to stop here. You—"

He stopped abruptly, for the herder had gasped and was lying still on the ground.

"One more answer, *only one*!" the Arizonian exclaimed, but it was not obtained, for the victim of brutality, the poor mutilated herder, was dead!

Black-Horse Steve straightened and gazed for a few moments at the man lying dead at his feet. If he had not been detained at Tucson, he would have found Chique stronger and able to give him a full account of the swoop of the vultures of blood.

Now, the man had written but two sentences, and the most important one a very faint clew.

"I'll start with what I have," he said at last. "I've never failed yet to get to the end of a trail and I will not fail now. We three will get thar; we three—horse, lasso, and man! Four reds and two whites, eh? Chique's eyes saw through their paint. Mebbe he knew them; he knew nearly everybody. Very well. I came to Ranch Robin too late to prevent its destruction, but not too late to swear to find its people and to pay the Arizonian vultures back!"

He walked to his horse after he had examined the ground about the ruined houses, and threw himself into the saddle.

Not a word he said, but he gazed for a moment longer at the terrible scene, and then struck his horse with the spur, and went off like an arrow toward the south.

Somebody was to hear from Black-Horse Steve.

CHAPTER II.

THE DEAD MAN AT ROCK-DUST.

RIDING the same horse and with the "Silken Lasso" hanging from his saddle-bow, the swarthy Arizonian rode into a mining-camp deep among the Mogollon Mountains, about forty-eight hours after he had galloped from Ranch Robin.

As usual, his restless eyes saw everything, and no sooner had he drawn rein in front of a certain cabin than fully twenty people were staring at him from as many favorable points of view, and each looker on was wondering what had brought the Mounted Mystery of Arizona to Rock-Dust.

Not that he had never entered the precincts of the place before, for he had, and always to see a certain inhabitant at whose door he had halted as usual.

Black-Horse Steve was well known throughout the ranch and mining country between mountains and river; but, for all that, he was known as a mystery, for nobody knew his antecedents, nor the object that kept him constantly in the saddle, and always on the go.

On the present occasion he seemed more excited than usual, and as he leaned from the saddle toward the cabin in Rock-Dust, he said in anxious tones:

"Felix?"

There was no response, and Steve spoke the name with the same result.

Then he threw a quick glance over his shoulder as if to see if anybody was near enough to question, and his eye alighted on a boy about seventeen, well built, clad in dirty buckskin, and with the grime of the mines on his face.

"Come here, boy!" commanded Steve.

The youth approached without hesitating and the Arizonian was soon looking down into his upturned face.

"Where's Felix?" he asked.

"Felix is dead!"

The answer seemed to stagger the avenger; to the boy he appeared to reel in his saddle.

"Come, don't give me wind," he said. "Felix, my—my friend, isn't dead?"

"You kin see for yourself; he's in thar!" and the youth glanced at the cabin.

Black-Horse Steve saw by the speaker's seriousness that he was not deceiving him.

"When did Felix die?" he asked.

"Last night."

"Always too late!" Steve murmured. "That infernal detention at Tucson has made me late everywhar. Was Felix sick long?"

The question was spoken aloud, and was addressed to the boy.

"We can't say, but we think not," was the answer. "They say he killed himself."

"Felix a suicide? I won't believe it!" cried Steve. "Go on and tell me about it before I go in."

Thus commanded—for the voice of the mounted man was the voice of command—the boy came closer to the Arizonian, and ventured to lay his hand on his knee.

"Somehow or other, Rock-Dust slept sounder than common, last night," he began. "That's what everybody says that I've heard speak about it. Felix was in the street at sundown an' thar seemed nothin' wrong with him then. Nobody knows when death came, for Felix war alone. Noisy Dan saw the cabin door wide open at daylight, an' as that war suthin' uncommon for Felix's shanty, he looked in. Thar he lay on his cot, dead, an' with the bottle of poison in his left hand."

"The bottle of poison, you say?" echoed Steve.

"Yes. I saw it thar myself, before they put it up on the table whar it is now. You kin see for yourself when you go in. Wal, that's about all I know. It's not very much, but thar isn't anybody in Rock-Dust what knows any more—not even Noisy Dan, who made the diskivery."

The Arizonian said nothing, but slid from the saddle and walked toward the door.

"Watch my hoss," he said to the boy, and a moment later he had pushed open the door and stepped inside.

At the left of the cabin door was a window that admitted some light, and nearly opposite it, in the rear of the shanty, was another. The light was not very strong, for the day was closing, but there was enough to show Black-Horse Steve the figure of a large man, apparently fifty years of age, lying on a rough cot at the foot of a table, on which stood the small bottle referred to by the boy.

"Dead, sure enough; but, by Jupiter! I can't swallow the suicide story!" ejaculated Steve, after one glance.

He reached the table by a single stride and picked up the bottle, keeping on with it to the rear window in whose light he examined the mutilated label. It looked very much to Steve as if the label had been scratched with a knife for the purpose of obliterating the name of the person who had sold the deadly drug, and he fell to examining it, wholly oblivious for the present of the dead man lying at his feet.

There was but little of the original label left, and all that greeted the Arizonian's eyes was this:

"-y-de. --ss-. --x. --on."

Where we have put dashes the letters had been scratched out, but the letters "on" at the last line told Steve that the poison had been sold in Tucson.

"It's a slim clew, but it's a starter," mused the Arizonian. "I say that Felix didn't die of his own accord. I don't care what Rock-Dust says, Felix had a reason for livin' an' nobody knows it better than Black-Horse Steve. Why warn't I here last night? I would hev flung death out o' the door an' kept him thar!"

He placed the empty bottle under his jacket, and then knelt beside the dead man. It was easily seen that the two had been friends, maybe had kindred interests, but Steve said nothing.

He threw back the covering of Felix's cot which was on the ground, the shanty had no floor, and there saw something that brightened his eyes.

"That settles it! The Rock-Dusters may talk of suicide all they please, but I know better. Good-by, Felix! They'll never make Black-Horse Steve b'lieve that you snuffed your own life's candle out, for he knows better. I'll lasso somebody for leavin' that bottle on your table, see if I don't. If the vultures hadn't been hoverin' over Ranch Robin, you'd be alive now, Felix. Heavens! I'll never see you happy, no! but, I'll have satisfaction!"

Steve dropped the hand of the dead man and went outside.

"Who ar' you, boy?" he asked.

"Feather Frank."

"You live here?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about the burning of Ranch Robin?"

"It's news to Rock-Dust," he said. "They've not heard of it."

"All right. I want the man in thar planted decently, an' his grave marked so I'll know it if I ever come this way again. Will you see to this?"

"I'll carry out your instructions to the letter. We would have planted Felix by noon, but some ov 'em said you might come, an' so we waited."

Black-Horse Steve put one foot into the stirrup and vaulted into the saddle.

"Feather Frank, eh?" he repeated, looking down into the upturned face of the boy. "I'll not forget the name. Mark Felix's grave; don't forget this, Feathery."

"When will you be back?" asked the boy innocently.

"Gods! I don't know," returned Steve with a grim smile. "Mebbe never, Frank. If I hadn't been detained in Tucson—but pshaw! what's the use o' cryin' over spilled batter?" and then he leaned toward the youth and finished in a startling whisper while his eyes flashed: "From now on, Feathery, it's a race for blood, twixt about half a dozen demons an' a silken lasso!"

The boy started back a pace and stared at the handsome man who had apparently changed countenance within a minute, and did not speak until Steve was riding down the main thoroughfare of the silver-camp.

"Shoot me for a gopher ef he doesn't take a whole bakery!" exclaimed Feather Frank as he stared after the Arizonian sport who would soon disappear at the end of the street. "What did he do in thar, I'd like to know?" and the boy turned toward the cabin whose door was open. "Hang me! if he didn't take the bottle that had the p'isen in!"

Almost before Black-Horse Steve had passed out of sight, Feather Frank was surrounded by a dozen men who were clamorous to know what the Mounted Mystery had said or done.

The boy replied to the many questions thrown out by the anxious crowd, and kept back but one thing—the parting words, the threat of Black-Horse Steve.

"An' he waltzed off with the p'isen bottle, eh?" ejaculated one of the men, a very dark faced Mexicanish looking man, whose left shoulder seemed a little lower than its companion on the right. "Did he say anything about it, Feather?"

"Not a word."

"Didn't, eh? didn't say what he thought war in the bottle, an' whar Felix got it?"

"No."

"Wal, as my name's, Gila Jose, he's a queer 'un," ejaculated the man, and then he withdrew from the crowd and went back to his shanty where, having shut the door carefully behind him, he found a piece of paper on which in no very scholarly hand he traced these words:

"The Mounted Mystery has just left Dust-Rock takin' with him the p'isen-bottle what he found on Felix's table. Look out for him. I'm afraid the label warn't scratched enough on the bottle. The Silken Lasso went south. He's a hoss that's got to be coraled."

"JOSE."

Having read the writing over with care, Gila Jose stowed it away in his bosom and went out.

Ten minutes later a man who looked very much like Gila Jose went mounted through the southern suburbs of Rock-Dust, and took not the same road down which Black-Horse Steve had galloped, but one that ran nearly parallel with it, and a much smoother way.

"They should hev begun on you, Steve," this man murmured. "My private opinion is that the Arizonian Mystery is a bad man to run at large. That Silken Lasso is no sham; it cuts like a bowie. On, on, hoss! We must beat this feller to Tucson."

Three miles apart, but riding in the same direction, though they knew it not, the two men galloped over the Arizona roads with the front feet of their steeds moving toward Tucson.

"I'm certain now that these two trails ar' goin' to run together—the one I found at Ranch Robin an' the one struck at Rock-Dust," said Black-Horse Steve. "I see the same hand in both blows; it smote Rolfo an' his ranch, an' tried to make believe that Felix killed himself. Won't I prove somebody liars? Won't I throw my lasso in the squar' of Tucson? Ah! vultures of Arizona, look out for me!"

On, on through the light of moon and stars; on, on toward the city of Southern Arizona.

Whenever his black horse showed signs of slacking his gait, Steve would stroke his heated neck and exclaim:

"To Tucson, Swiftfoot! Thar's vengeance thar!"

CHAPTER III.

ON THE TRAIL IN TUCSON.

"It was well done, you say, Samson? You are certain you left no trail behind?"

"Can you trail a snake when it has crept through a forest? If you can, then we left a trail behind us."

"But the reds? You left them satisfied?"

"I reckon the plunder an' the captive did

that. The ranch buildin's made a hot fire, cap'n. Nobody fought very hard; we took ther hull shootin'-match by surprise; they didn't git ready ter fight till it war too late. You kin bet yer life, Silver Belt, it war well done."

"All right, then. I trust you, Samson."

The man called Silver Belt, large and handsome, rose from the chair in which he was seated in a certain room in Tucson, and walked to a heavy wooden desk that filled one corner.

Unlocking it, he raised the lid and took out a heavy buckskin bag which undoubtedly contained coin.

"The reds ar' paid, you say?" he said, coming back to the man called Samson, and well named, too, for he was a veritable giant.

"I settled with them, cap'n," was the answer.

Silver Belt said no more, but emptied the contents of the bag on the table near Samson's chair, and began to count the glittering gold coins. During this task the evil eyes of the solitary watcher grew bright with the gleam of greed, and he, too, counted the money in an undertone after Silver Belt.

"Thar's just enough in the sack. You can take the whole platter," said Silver Belt with a smile, and he began to put the coins back into the buckskin wallet, adding as he did so: "I guess this pile won't last you long among the monte tables of Tucson."

"Mebbe not, cap'n," grinned Samson. "I may add to it, though fortune hasn't given me a fair show inside o' six months. I'll go an' buck the tiger, an' if he claws me, I'll not squeal."

"That's it, Samson. Remember that thar's no more whar this came from. I never pay a debt but once. We ar' squar' now. You've settled with the reds, an' I've paid you. It's settled, eh?"

"Settled, cap'n," was the sententious rejoinder, and the giant took up the bag of coin and walked from the room, watched until he was no longer seen by Silver Belt who had just paid him for one of the most dastardly "jobs" ever performed for gold in Arizona.

"I don't more than half take his word in some matters," mused Silver Belt when the door had closed behind Samson. "He'll lose that money inside of three hours, an' he's likely to come back hyer for more. He will forget that I have paid him every cent I agreed to, an' if he does come back whinin' for more, I'll remind him that I never add interest to a debt once paid."

Everybody knew the speaker. He had a bad reputation which had gone far beyond the confines of Tucson, and, in some respects, it was not a good one. Ralph Porson, or Silver Belt, as he was always called had made money "hand over fist," and was known as one of the silver kings of the Southwest. He owned more than one monte den in Tucson, had an interest in several silver mines, and as many great ranches, and was, moreover, a desperado who had more than once killed his man in encounters which were not to his credit.

As miner, herder, bandit, sport, Silver Belt was well known in different sections of the country, and, as a matter of course, his acquaintanceship was extensive, if not very select.

At the time of which we write there was no more prominent figure in Tucson than this same Silver Belt, this man who had drawn around him tools like the man Samson, and who, while he lived in style in the Arizonian town, reached far beyond it, and added to his wealth in more ways than one.

It was several days after the desolation of Ranch Robin that the interview described above took place in Silver Belt's house.

Tucson, not the civilized, thriving Tucson of to-day, had had no excitement for forty-eight hours, and its people, for the most part roughs, miners and mountain desperadoes were sighing for something that would shake them up.

The shadows of another night were falling over the town when Samson reached the street with the bag of coin concealed under his jacket and clutched by his right hand.

This man's greatest passion was gambling, and if Silver Belt had followed him, he would have seen him enter one of the dozen monte institutions then running in full blast in Tucson. And if he had waited at the door one hour, he would have seen Samson emerge from the den with a countenance showing plainly that he had been effectually clawed by "the tiger" inside.

In sixty minutes Samson had lost his last dollar, and was as poor as when he first met Silver Belt, a year before.

"He said I shouldn't come back for more, didn't he?" growled the victim of the monte tables. "He says he never pays interest on

debts once canceled. I don't know but that's good policy, but I've got ter hev more dust somehow. I'm goin' ter eucher thet monte tiger ef it takes blood. It's ther third time I've been clawed within thirty days. By Jehu! I'm goin' ter git even! Thar's enough left of this mountain chick ter whip ther beast out o' his hide."

Samson cast a sidelong glance down the street and moved off. He walked hastily toward Silver Belt's house, and had just turned into the street on which it stood, when he came to a sudden halt, uttering at the same time an ejaculation of astonishment.

"Hades! what makes that fellar turn up in Tucson at this time?" he cried, and his gaze became riveted on a horseman who had just turned into the street and was riding toward him.

It was evident from Samson's ejaculation that the horseman was known to him, and he retreated involuntarily toward the building as he came on.

"I could make money by sellin' what I know to you," continued Samson, eying the rider who was a handsome man with sombrero, slashed jacket and pantaloons, and with a lasso hanging from his saddle-bow. "If I wanted ter betray ther captain, I needn't suffer long fer money ter buck the tiger ag'in, fer ther man on ther black hoss yonder 'd give a cool thousand fer what I carry in my head."

Samson continued to watch the horseman, who was no less a person than Black-Horse Steve, and was astonished to see him dismount in front of a building, the front room of which was occupied as a drug-store, where drugs were sold for their weight in gold.

"What's he goin' ter buy?" queried Samson of himself, and a singular curiosity led him down the street to the drug-store in front of which he halted at a spot that enabled him to view the inside from the open door.

He saw Black-Horse Steve walk up to the counter which stood between him and the proprietor and run his hand beneath his jacket.

"Jupiter!" ejaculated Samson as the Arizonian drew forth a small bottle apparently empty. "Whar did he git that?"

Then he heard Steve's voice in anxious tones: "Look at that bottle," he said to the druggist. "What was in it last, and was it sold hyer?"

The druggist took the bottle from Steve's hand, looked at the mutilated label, and then applied it to his nostrils.

He evidently knew the man with whom he was dealing—he must have seen by Black-Horse Steve's eyes that he would stand no equivocation, and that he had come a long distance for the truth.

"The label's been scratched off for a purpose," said Steve, as the druggist examined it.

"I see, but enough remains for me to identify it. The 'x' is the last letter of my name—Colfax, you know?"

"Then you sold the last contents of that bottle?"

"I did."

"And it was—"

"Cyanide of potassium."

"A deadly poison?"

"I should say it is," said the druggist. "One of the deadliest, sir, in the market. Now, sir, will you let me ask where you came across this bottle?"

"When I have put another question," said Steve. "Who bought the poison?"

At this question, direct as a shaft from an Indian bow, the druggist hesitated.

"A secret, eh?" ejaculated Black-Horse Steve. "You keep a 'poison book,' don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you know who bought this killin' stuff?"

"Perhaps, but—"

"Don't like ter give yer poison customers away? Now, look hyer, Mr. Colfax," and one of Black-Horse Steve's swarthy but velvet hands dropped cat-like on the druggist's wrist. "I've come a long ways ter find out who sold that poison an' who bought it. You don't like ter tell me, I see, because you think it killed somebody. Wal, whether it did or not, I'm hyer ter find out who bought it. Now, sir, tell me!"

The last brief sentence was a command, and the glittering eyes of the Arizonian were full of threats.

"Since you must know I'll tell you," the druggist said, "but I beg of you not to give me away."

Steve made no promise; his lips only said:

"Go on!"

"I sold the drug to a man who had his name put on the book as S. Bronson."

"S. Bronson, eh?" echoed Steve. "Do you

sell poison to every Tom, Dick an' Harry that calls?"

"No, sir."

"Who recommended this customer to you?"

Despite the hand on his wrist the druggist hesitated again.

"I'm hyer ter know," said Black-Horse Steve coolly.

"Well, Silver Belt did."

"Ralph Porson?" said Steve, speaking a name seldom heard in Tucson. "So he buys poison through another person, eh?" And he added under his breath: "I thought he preferred the revolver."

"Now, sir," said the druggist, "you will tell me where you found the empty bottle?"

"I made no promises," was the quick response. "I'll take the bottle back, if you please." And he took the empty vial without resistance from the druggist's hand, and then turned toward the street.

"Good-night, Mr. Colfax," he finished, and left the druggist amazed at his coolness.

Ere he reached the door the man who had listened to the above conversation had disappeared, but he had not passed out of sight.

"I see a way of gettin' more money to tackle the monte tiger with," he said, as he saw Steve remount the horse which had waited for him in front of the building. "I kin sell what I know for another start ter Silver Belt. He needn't add more to the old debt; I'll just sell him my diskivery."

Silver Belt's house was not far from the drug-store, and Samson soon reached it.

He went up the steps, crossed the porch and struck the door heavily with his knuckles.

"Whar's ther cap'n?" he said to the boy who opened the door.

"Busy just now."

"Wal, I'll hev ter disturb 'im; it's important," and the burly figure of Samson brushed past the youth, and pushed open the door at his right.

As he crossed the threshold his eyes caught sight of two men, instead of but one as he had expected to see, and the next moment he uttered an exclamation of wonder as he faced Silver Belt's companion.

"You hyer, Gila Jose?" he cried.

"I'm hyer!" answered the man addressed, showing his teeth. "What d'yer think, Samson? Black-Horse Steve, Felix's right bower, is on ther way ter Tucson."

"No, he isn't, Gila. He's hyer now, an' Colfax, ther druggist, hez given ther hull thing away!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE LASSO'S FIRST CATCH.

"So it's your work, eh, Silver Belt? Well, I hardly expected to see you mixed up in the poisonin' affair so deeply, but I can't say that I am so terribly surprised."

Black-Horse Steve sat in the saddle but half a square from Silver Belt's house while he spoke thus, and it would be safe to say that his eyes were fastened on one of the windows in which there was a light.

The man with the silken lasso had apparently tracked somebody to the house; why not Samson, or Gila Jose, who thought he had beaten Steve to Tucson? At any rate, he was there almost within the shadow of Silver Belt's home for a purpose, and that it was not one of friendship his keen eyes showed.

He had traced home the purchaser of the poison which had taken Felix's life miles and miles to the north in Rock-Dust; he had made a discovery which had startled him, and he and his silken lasso had struck a trail on the street of the Arizonian town.

"Somebody will come out soon. I know it," he continued, still watching the house. "All's fish that drops into my net to-night. If I am not mistaken, there ar' two men in thar, Silver Belt an' one of his pards. The door 'll open presently to let one o' em out, then—something will happen!"

He had scarcely finished when a door near the lighted window was thrown open, and the figure of a stalwart man appeared therein.

Steve watched the man with a keen eye.

"All right, I'll report later," the giant said, speaking to some one in the house as he paused a moment on the threshold. "We'll git to ther end ov ther new trail afore mornin', cap'n. Bet yer everlastin' boots thet I'm a rattler when I git down ter bizness."

The door closed and the speaker sprung from the porch and landed in the street.

"I'll be able ter buck ther tiger ag'in," he ejaculated. "Thar's more ways than one ter raise ther wind in Arizony. I'm not ther hair-

pin ter stay broke long, an' then I'm one ov ther pards thet's rich in exredients when they'r bu'sted. It war a durned good thing, thet long-haired mystery's coming ter town ter-night. He hezn't been ter Tucson fer a rattler's age."

Black-Horse Steve did not catch all these words, though he was leaning forward with a coil of rope—his ribboned lasso—in his right hand.

All at once he touched his steed with a spur and as the animal went forward, the noose left the sport's grip, shooting straight at the man who had just left the house.

"Heavens! lariatied!" cried the victim over whose head the noose dropped without any warning of its intent, and the following second his arms were pinioned to his sides, and that before his quick hands could touch bowie or revolver.

"Who did this?" he grated, wheeling upon the lassoer. "Who dares ter— Great God! You?"

The black horse had stopped within five feet of him, and he was staring into the cool but triumphant face of the man who leaned from the saddle.

"Yes, it's me!" was Steve's reply. "You did not think I war about, eh? I turn up sometimes when I'm not wanted. No answer hyer. I want to see you, but outside o' Tucson."

"See me?" stammered the captive, who was Samson.

"That's what I caught you for. Come along! Be docile, pard. I don't want your blood; but you mustn't try Black-Horse Steve."

Samson bit his lip, but made no answer. He saw he was in a trap, and in the power of a man who would not be trifled with any more than the desperate silver prince whose house he had just left; therefore, he let Steve lead him down the street, he keeping close to the horse, so as not to let any one see that he had been lassoed.

There was something singular in the sight of one man leading another captive through the streets of Tucson. It was an event that did not happen every day, but then on this occasion no one saw it, and Samson felt relieved.

No halt was made till the town was left behind and the tops of the nearest mountains that looked down upon the Arizona town loomed up against the heavens.

Samson began to wonder whither he was to be conducted when Black-Horse Steve halted and looked down into his face.

"Samson, eh?" he said, laconically, but in a manner which the athlete understood.

"Thet's what they call me," was the answer.

"One of Silver Belt's pards?"

"One ov ther cap'n's friends."

"Which means a pard. You ar' S. Bronson, I suppose."

The look which Samson gave Black-Horse Steve told him that the shaft had gone straight to the mark.

"Now, Samson, tell me whose knee left its mark in the ground alongside o' Felix's blankets. War it yours, er some other pard's?"

"Ye'r talkin' in riddles ter me," said Samson. "Felix who? See, hyer, Black-Horse Steve; hev'n't you caught ther wrong gudgeon?"

Samson's manner might have deceived some people, but the man in the saddle had not come to Tucson to be hoodwinked at the first move.

"No," he said. "I know exactly who I've caught, and you know whose knee made a mark in ther ground by Felix's blanket. Felix who, Samson? Why, ther man you poisoned t'other night in Rock-Dust arter ther Arizona vultures swooped down on Ranch Robin. Don't look inter my face an' say thet Felix took his own life. You didn't hide ther marks ov a struggle as you should hev done. Ther empty bottle on ther table might hev said 'suicide,' but ther knee-print by ther cot gave ther hull thing away. No lyin', Samson, I won't stand it!"

Samson showed his mad eyes and yellowish teeth a moment longer, eyed sternly by the man who looked downward from the saddle, and then snapped:

"You seem ter know it all, Steve ov Arizony. What's ther use ov quizzin' me?"

"Thar! you hev'n't answered me. I asked you whose knee-mark war thet left in Rock-Dust."

"Not mine."

"Not yours, eh? Whose, then?"

Samson was silent.

"Very well, Samson," smiled Black-Horse Steve, and all at once Silver Belt's tool and pard found himself looking up into the muzzle of a six-shooter. "I have told you that I don't want yer blood. I don't, Samson; but I want no foolishness. Now will you spit out the truth? Will you tell me who left his knee-print whar Felix died? You know!"

"Wal, what ef I should say it war Silver Belt?"

"I would call you a liar an' prove it," said Steve. "No, it wasn't the imprint of Silver Belt's knee, though he knew something war ter be done at ther North. He sent S. Bronson to ther drug-store for ther poison, but he remained in Tucson. Now go on, Samson."

"I'll play fair with yer, Steve, though I don't b'lieve in forcin' a fellar ter give his pard away at ther muzzle ov a dropper. I can't do better now. I might keep my mouth shut an' die, but a man's a fool ter when he kin tell ther truth an' live."

"Right you ar', Samson!"

"Wal, Gila Jose left thet mark behind, I guess."

"Gila Jose?" repeated Steve. "Thar's a man in Rock-Dust—"

"Thet's him!" interrupted Samson.

"He did it?"

"Thet's what I intimated."

"An' you didn't do anything, but take ther poison worth."

"Me, Steve?"

"Yes, you! Oh, no; you're innocent as a lamb. I could trust you with a gold-mine, Samson. You're a child in innocence. A guilty thought'd make you blush. You took the poison to Rock-Dust, but you didn't know what it war for; you probably turned yer back while it war bein' administered. You're a charmer, Samson."

While the Arizonian was speaking Samson was showing his teeth in a malicious grin; he felt the cutting sarcasm of the language used, and waited in silence for Steve to conclude.

"Do you want to know anything else?" he asked.

"What ef I should ask you what Felix said when you surprised him? But I won't do this, Samson. I'll know one ov these days. It's not very important now. But what happened at Ranch Robin a few nights ago? Who cut Chique's tongue out, an' left him ter die in ther garden?"

It seemed that Samson had expected an interrogative of this kind, that he had steeled himself against surprise, for he did not start, nor in the slightest manner betray himself.

"Ranch Robin, eh?" he said coolly. "Ask me what happened in Frisco last night, Black-Hoss Steve. I kin tell yer jest as well. What did happen thar? Anything?"

"Yes!" and the speaker's lips shut like a spring worked trap-door behind the little word. "If you don't know—thar! I'll get at ther bottom of it before long, Samson. They may hood-wink Steve for a little while—then, let the vultures of Arizona look out. Now, my friend, I'm done with you. You can go back to town with me if you want to, or elsewhar, just as it hits your fancy."

A sudden jerk, and then a peculiar twist of the lasso followed the last word, and the loosened noose dropped at Samson's feet to be suddenly caught up at the saddle-bow. Mechanically the athlete stepped back, but saw the revolver still in Steve's hand.

"You're thinkin' that you'll get even with me, eh, Samson?" smiled the man in the saddle as he looked into the giant's face. "All right, old fellow. This is a free country, but, remember, that I'm a bad man when I'm trifled with on the trail. Goin' back ter town, eh? Come along."

A few minutes later the two men re-entered Tucson, and at the first cross-street Black-Horse Steve turned to the left, and with a hurried "Good-night, Samson," left so suddenly that Silver Belt's pard was astounded.

"Gone, an' afore I could get ther drop on 'im, eh?" exclaimed Samson, gazing down the street wherein the Arizonian Mystery had disappeared. "When he lassoes me ag'in, he'll know it. He forced from me ther truth consarnin' Felix's death, but not a word did he git from me about Ranch Robin. I war true to ther cap'n thar. I'd hev let him shatter my brain-box afore I'd hev given that swoop away. Bet yer life I would, cap'n."

Black-Horse Steve had already disappeared, and a few moments later Samson turned and walked rapidly toward Silver Belt's house.

"I'll jest post 'im about ther Mystery wantin' ter know about Ranch Robin," he mused, as he went up the steps and knocked.

The door was opened as usual by the youth who, for years, had served Silver Belt with zeal.

"Back ag'in, Billy," said Samson. "I want ter see ther cap'n."

"But you cannot," was the answer. "He went off with Gila Jose; but there's a note here for you."

"Shove it forth, Billy."

The next minute Samson stood in the lamp-light and read the message, as follows:

"I have left Tucson. Will be absent several days. Keep 'im here till I come back, or kill him!"

"All right," said Samson, glancing up at Billy. "I'll do one ov ther two things—probably ther latter!"

CHAPTER V.

SAMSON MISSES HIS MARK.

"PROBABLY the latter, Samson?" echoed Silver Belt's boy, looking up into the face of the giant, who had given vent to his words in a most vicious manner. "I think that'd suit the captain best."

"Then you know what the message says, eh?" And Samson extended the paper toward the boy.

"I ought to," was the answer, accompanied with a smile. "I wrote it myself, at Silver Belt's dictation, just before he left the house."

"Eh? Do you know who he refers to?"

"Not exactly, Samson."

"But you hev a purty good idea? An' so you think I'd please ther cap'n best by doin' what this note suggests in its wind-up?"

"That's what I've said."

Samson said no more, but crumpled the message in his big brown hand and walked out of the house.

"Gone away from Tucson! goin' ter be absent several days; wants ther man on horseback kept hyer, dead or alive! Thet's ther way ther land lies jest now. Wal, he'll stay hyer. It's Samson what says so, cap'n, an' Samson's a hoss—bet yer eyeballs!"

The big pard of the silver king went down the street and within the next thirty minutes had dropped into half a dozen monte banks and saloons, which institutions were, at the time, the curse of Tucson.

Without a dollar in his pocket, he managed to get several drinks through the kindness of friends, for it was known that Samson was a bad man when crossed, and nobody, not even acknowledged desperadoes, cared to reject his feelers for a glass of liquor. He was known in every monte den in town, and whenever he played, which was as often as he had any wealth, he displayed a recklessness that astonished even old players.

But now Samson was not in a condition to fight the tiger; he could thrust his great hands into the depths of his pockets and yet touch not a single coin; he had thrown to the beast a wallet of gold only a short time before. Therefore, Samson was compelled to swallow his poverty, though it choked him, and to look empty-handed upon the faro and pecco tables with nobody kind enough to lend him a dollar.

"I'll find him flush!" he suddenly exclaimed to himself. "He didn't come ter Tucson dead broke. 'Keep 'im hyer till I git back!' Thet's what ther cap'n says."

Samson turned suddenly from one of the gaming tables while yet the last word fell from his lips, and went out into the street again.

He was now on the hunt of the man who had come to Tucson from the dead man left behind in Rock-Dust; he was as eager to meet Black-Horse Steve as he had been to avoid him a short time before; and with several drinks of Arizona whisky ahead, Samson had nerve enough to tackle an imp just from Tartarus.

In the first place, Black-Horse Steve came to Tucson so seldom that he had no regular "head-quarters," therefore, Samson was somewhat at a loss where to look for him. He had seen the Arizonian in the place but once before, and then, as at present, at large on the street, and mounted on the black horse, his inseparable companion.

"Probably he's dropped in at ther Crystal Palace," suddenly said Samson, and off he went toward the most pretentious hotel in Tucson, a rather exalted building for the times and place, and one which fronted on the main square or plaza.

It would be by the merest chance if he found the mysterious Arizonian there, but Samson evidently thought that a look in that direction would do no harm, and a few strides brought him to the square.

"More luck than sense!" he cried, almost the moment he struck the square. "Shoot me for a Digger squaw! ef thar doesn't stand that big black piece ov swiftness waiting for his master. All right, Steve, my cherub. Ther cap'n says 'keep 'im in Tucson,' an' hyer's whar ye'r goin' ter stay."

It was the custom of the proprietor of the Crystal Palace to hang a lamp with a polished reflector in front of the hotel after dark, and the

light thus afforded always revealed a good part of the square.

It was so on this occasion, and in the light Samson saw the handsome horse which was as well-known in eastern Arizona as his master. And as the horse stood directly in front of the Crystal Palace, he was plainly visible.

The sight sent one of Samson's huge hands toward a huge revolver that rested on one of his hips, and he stopped just beyond the fall of the light, and remained stationary and watchful.

Five minutes passed away and nobody seemed to see the stalwart desperado who watched for the Arizonian to emerge from the Crystal Palace where the presence of the black horse proclaimed him to be. Samson had a good deal of patience, and that when he knew he could bring about a collision by crossing the threshold of the hotel.

"He can't outwind me if I am gittin' dry," muttered Silver Belt's agent. "I'll bet my head that somethin' 'll drop within a radius ov a mile afore daylight for that hoss wain't left thar ter keep guard all night."

No, that he was not, for Samson had hardly finished when the handsome figure of Black-Horse Steve emerged from the door of the Crystal Palace, and stood for a moment on the veranda in the full glare of the brilliant lamp.

"Jehosaphat! ain't he a daisy!" mentally ejaculated Samson. "He's a picter from boots ter sombrero. Ther molds must hev broken arter makin' him. But all that makes no difference. 'Keep 'im hyer till I git back,' ther cap'n says!" And Samson's pistol-hand moved upward, for just at that moment Black-Horse Steve left the porch and moved toward his steed.

The horse was between Samson and the hotel, and about thirty yards distant, and Samson's eagerness carried him a step nearer.

"I war goin' ter try it in another quarter ov ther town, but mebbe I'll not git a chance," he grated in a whisper. "When he mounts, jest watch 'im tumble!"

Steve, the Arizonian, appeared as eager to give Samson the coveted chance as he was to obtain it, for three strides carried him to the horse, and he reached the saddle by a single bound without having touched the stirrups.

"Straight through the head an' a dead tumble!" slipped between Samson's teeth, and forward went his pistol arm.

Silver Belt's tool was not the man to hesitate, and he pressed the trigger with delight.

There was a crack and a flash, and a noise of shattered glass, and Samson felt like throwing his revolver down with a furious oath!

For once in his life he had missed a human target, and instead of the Arizonian's head, had broken to pieces and extinguished the lamp that hung in front of the Crystal Palace.

The startling failure of his shot seemed to glue Samson to the spot from which he had fired.

He saw the figure of Black-Horse Steve still upright in the saddle from which he had not taken the "dead tumble," but he was too surprised over his shot to try again.

All at once, however, he saw the black steed turn, and before he could stir, a stern voice reached his ears.

"Hold thar, you! For ther lock yer bullet clipped I'll take your life if you stir. I've got ther drop on you, Samson, my dog!"

In a glance, as it were, Black-Horse Steve had recognized the athlete in the square; he had marked his powerful physique, and was moving down upon him, with a revolver pointed straight at his head.

Samson expected death; he knew the unwritten law of the wild Southwest too well to hope for mercy at the hands of the man whose life he had attempted, and he waited for the ball that would prevent him from carrying out Silver Belt's orders.

A minute is a long time to some men, to others it passes like a flash of light, and as swift as a flash it was to Samson.

Black-Horse Steve came down upon him almost before the echoes of his unfortunate shot had died away, and Samson saw himself looking up into the Arizonian's face for the second time since sundown.

"A lamp instead of a man, eh, Samson?" said Steve with a laugh that was not at all merry to Silver Belt's pard. "Can't you shoot no better than that? Missin' a man like me at thirty steps! Why, man, you'll hev to practice. I b'lieve I ought ter spare you till you kin hit something."

Samson's eyes said plainly: "I think you had better not," but Steve, notwithstanding their menace went on:

"I do spare you. I won't spatter Tucson's best plaza with your blood to-night. The next time, Samson, hit your man. Waltz into the Palace like a man an' pay for the lamp. I'm goin' off; don't follow me. Silver Belt vamoosed the ranch awhile ago, an' I've nothin' ter keep me hyer. Samson, old pard, I'm of the opinion thet you know something about Ranch Robin; but never mind. The Silken Lasso will get thar at last!" and the steel spur on the left foot touched the black steed's flank, and Samson stood alone, the most amazed man in Tucson.

"Jehu!" he cried. "He had me an' he didn't kill me! Black-Horse Steve, ye'r a fool!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE ROSE OF RANCH ROBIN.

OVER a rather broad trail that meandered across a beautiful valley not far from Rock-Dust rode two men on powerful horses.

Night was not far away and the pair were approaching a dark line of mountains behind which a brilliant sun had just set.

"Will she know you, cap'n?" asked one of the men, looking into the face of his companion, who was a powerful man with piercing black eyes, long hair, and a skin the hue of a Mexican's.

"Well, she may, Gila Jose, though it's been five years since I was Rolfo's guest at Ranch Robin," was the reply. "These girls have tenacious memories sometimes, an' hers may be of that sort. She did not suspect when you swooped down on the ranch that you were not an Apache, eh, Jose?"

"I should say not, cap'n! Samson an' I war completely disguised, an' looked like two Paches for all the world. We didn't leave a smidgin' ov Ranch Robin; but I'd like ter know—"

Here the speaker, who was Gila Jose of Rock-Dust, broke his own sentence abruptly, and looked into the eyes of his comrade no less a personage than Silver Belt.

"You'd like to know what? The bargain was, I believe, that no questions war ter be asked, warn't it?"

"Yes, cap'n, but I don't want ter know yer reasons for wipin' Robin out, but—"

"Well?"

"I'd like ter know, jest out ov curiosity, you see, what kind o' link connects, er connected, three men, Rolfo, Felix an' Black-Horse Steve."

Silver Belt gave Gila Jose a long, deep look before he replied.

"An' you'd like to know this, eh? Oh, you shrewd old rascal, you! Of course nothin' prompts you but curiosity!" he laughed.

"Nothin' more than that—I'm ready ter swar it, cap'n!" cried Jose, and up went his right hand. "I've got an idea thet those three men ar' strangely connected, an' thet you know suthin' about it."

"An' I do," said Silver Belt, in a mysterious manner, that served to increase Jose's curiosity.

"But you won't elucidate, I suspect?"

"Why not? We ar' pards, Jose, an' you've done me one good turn within the last two weeks."

"I always play fair, cap'n."

"Very well, then," and Silver Belt leaned toward the citizen of Rock-Dust as he continued, in a slightly lower tone: "About twelve years ago three men invaded Arizona; they came from Lower California, an' war somewhat tough. They had roughed it all over gold-dom, from Shasta to the Gulf, but two ov 'em hedn't enough ter buy a mountain graveyard. By an' by they agreed ter separate; one went ter Texas, whar he struck it rich, one planted himself in Arizona, an' the other stuck ter the saddle."

"I know that last one—Black-Hoss Steve!" ejaculated the listener.

Silver Belt gave an approving nod, and went on:

"Since you have guessed so well, Gila, let me inform you that the pard who went ter Texas lately owned Ranch Robin, an' thet ther second one war Felix, who died t'other night in Rock-Dust. Those war ther three pards who came from Lower California twelve years ago. Rolfo found a girl somewhar on the line, an' adopted her; but Felix never got higher than a cabin in Rock-Dust, an' ended his days by takin' poison, as you know, Jose."

A smile was visible at the corners of Silver Belt's mouth as he paused.

"War thar nothin' stronger than pardship ter link those three men together?" asked Gila Jose.

"What do you think?"

"Pardship is strong, I know, cap'n, but blood is stronger."

Silver Belt darted the speaker a quick look.

"You're right," he said. "Kinship is stron-

ger than pardship, an' thet's what bound the three men together. They war brothers, Gila."

"No!" exclaimed Silver Belt's companion. "Rolfo, Felix an' Steve brothers, eh?"

"They war nothin' less."

For several minutes longer the two men rode silently toward the mountains; then Gila Jose leaned suddenly toward Silver Belt, and laid a finger on his sleeve.

"I'm not goin' ter interfere with yer affairs, cap'n; thet's not Gila Jose's style. You sent us ter Ranch Robin with orders which we carried out ter the letter; you said, 'Kill Felix, an' make it look like suicide,' an' thet's what we've done; you didn't give us any orders about Black-Hoss Steve."

"I left them behind for Samson," said Silver Belt, quickly, and with a smile. "He knows just what to do, an' Samson has never failed me yet."

"But he's got his hands full now," said Gila Jose. "It took two ov us ter handle Felix, an' we ar' no slouches; but hyer you've left one man ter finish Felix's brother."

"But I left Samson!" said Silver Belt with confidence.

"All right, an' Samson has never failed you, you say?"

"Never!"

Gila Jose made no answer, but turned his head away, and began to whistle.

"What! don't you think Samson is that man's match?" cried Silver Belt, coloring and perplexed by Jose's whistling.

"He never failed you, cap'n," said Jose, with a grin. "Samson an' the last ov ther Californy pards pitted ag'in' each other! We'll watch ther result."

The silver desperado saw by his companion's manner that he did not have much confidence in Samson's ability to cope with Black-Horse Steve, and he would have rebuked him in a sharp manner if they had not entered the shadows of the mountains.

"How far is she from here?" he suddenly asked.

"Nearer than you think, cap'n."

"Did the Indians see you hide her away?"

"Not much. We let them take Rolfo north, while we turned off with ther gal. We turn down ther trail hyer, ride about three miles, an' then—then, I'll show you ther prettiest flower thet ever grewed 'twixt ther Gila an' ther Chiquito."

Silver Belt's black eyes kindled with satisfaction at Gila Jose's last sentence, and the two men quickened the gait of their steeds and set off in a smart gallop over the trail.

In less than twenty minutes Jose, who was 'n the advance, drew rein, and looked at Silver Belt in a triumphant way. They had reached a spot where the trail led along a wall of rock, and from one side looked down into a snug little valley nearly one thousand feet below.

"Is she there?" asked Silver Belt, eagerly.

"Hyar, cap'n!"

The man from Tucson looked penetratingly around, but saw no signs of a hiding-place.

Gila Jose slid from the saddle and began to uncoil the black extra-thick lasso that hung from the brass-tipped saddle-bow.

"Come, cap'n; ye've got ter go down ter ther dove-cote," he said to Silver Belt with a smile, and forthwith the man from Tucson dropped to the ground.

Meanwhile, Gila Jose had uncoiled the lariat, and had made a little loop or stirrup at one end.

"You go down to her on this, cap'n," he said.

"Come. Ther openin' to her parlor is about twenty feet below ther top ov ther wall. Escape's impossible, cap'n. It's an old den ov mine; diskivered it accidentally years ago, an' never had any use for it till it came ter me ter clap ther Chiquito Rose inter it fer you. Thar ye ar', Silver. I'll hold ther rope; now over ye go."

And Silver Belt dropped over the edge of the trail, and was lowered inch by inch, the black lasso slipping through Gila Jose's hands.

"I'll play fair with ther cap'n," said the bronzed fellow to himself as he lowered Silver Belt. "He's played thet way with me thus far. I'd like ter see ther meetin' 'twixt him an' ther gal, but I can't do thet an' hold this lasso."

Gila Jose could not even look over the edge of the trail to note Silver Belt's progress but that individual was lowered until he reached a dark, cavernous entrance that seemed to lead into the solid rock.

"Her home!" he said. "The home of the prettiest girl north of the city of Mexico."

In another moment the silver sport had swung himself to a lodgment within the aperture, and having disengaged himself from the

lasso he pushed down a rather commodious corridor of stone, and reached a large cave illuminated by a fire that burned in the middle of the stone floor.

"Not at home, eh? Has the bird flown?" ejaculated Silver Belt in audible tones as he saw nobody.

"No! I am here!" was the reply in a rich voice, and there stepped forth from the darkest portion of the cavern, a young girl of seventeen, of striking beauty, and finely molded figure.

Silver Belt could scarcely repress a cry of delight; he had not seen the Chiquito Rose since she was a mere child and he could hardly believe that the beautiful girl and the little ward of Rolfo of Ranch Robin were identical.

Still, the proof of it was before him, and a second look showed him that he actually stood in her presence.

"I know you," continued Rolfo's ward as she came forward with her deep dark eyes riveted upon Silver Belt. "You are the silver king of Southern Arizona, and you have been to Ranch Robin. They call you Silver Belt. Why, even the men vultures who swooped down upon the ranch, knew you."

Silver Belt started. Had either of his white tools intimated to the girl that Ranch Robin owed its destruction to him?

"What's that?" he said, dissimulating. "Who knew me?"

"The fiends who blighted our lives in a night—the villains who burned the ranch home, butchered three servants, and carried off Rolfo and me!"

"Impossible! when did this occur?"

Another stride brought the girl still nearer the man from Tucson.

"Take me to Rolfo," she said. "My God! you do not want to separate us now, do you? He has been a father to me. The Indians took him to the north—toward Apachedom; the two white men who played Indian fetched me to this place. What was our crime that Ranch Robin had to be burned, our servants butchered, and we separated and led into captivity?"

Silver Belt looked astounded.

The girl seemed to know it all; she had penetrated the disguise of his tools; now, did she know that he had charged them with the infamy they had performed?

"What! will you not make reparation?" she went on before he could speak. "Stand there, Silver Belt, and with your right hand lifted toward heaven, tell me, if you dare, that you knew nothing of all this till now. The last words that Rolfo whispered ere they tore us apart told me much. Swear that you had no hand in it. You were not there; no, I should have known you. Now, sir, I command you to take me hence, to take me to Rolfo!"

"I can't do that, girl. The Apaches have him, you say?"

"But they were your tools, like the painted whites. Take me to him, Silver Belt, or I will avenge on your head the desolation of Ranch Robin!"

Despite his audacity, the silver sport from Tucson went back a pace from before the girl.

"Very well!" she said, terribly calm in a moment. "Keep me here in this cave, with the mountains above and the gulch below. For all that, the debt of vengeance will be paid. There were three of them, Silver Belt. You know the trio who came together from California years ago. You have sat on the veranda of Ranch Robin and listened to the story of their trials. Two are left to strike, Felix and Stephen."

Silver Belt laughed; he thought of Felix dead, and Black-Horse Steve watched by Samson in Tucson.

"Come; let's compromise, girl," he said.

"With you?—with the man who sent the merciless vultures to Ranch Robin? I'd rather leap from this cave to the bottom of the canyon below!"

CHAPTER VII.

GILA JOSE'S PIC-NIC.

"I'll find means to tame her, Jose. She's a tigress now, but I'll transform her into a lamb before I get to the end of this game," said Silver Belt when Gila Jose had again drawn him up to the trail from his interview with the beauty of Ranch Robin.

"What! couldn't you do any thing with her, cap'n?" asked Jose in astonished tones.

"No, curse somebody who mentioned my name in her presence after the destruction of the ranch. Was it you?"

"Nary time, cap'n."

"Did you hear Samson speak of me where she could have heard?"

"No."

"Somebody gave it away; she says so."

The man from Tucson was in bad humor; he had traveled miles to meet the girl against whom he plotted, and she had given him cause for believing that she knew of his villainy; his schemes seemed to have been formed for naught.

Night had fallen over the mountain trail, and the two men stood by their horses at whose saddles hung the inseparable lasso of the Arizonian.

"Which way now, cap'n?" asked Gila Jose at last. "Go it back to Tucson, whar you left Samson ter take keer ov Black-Hoss Steve, or—"

Gila Jose broke his own sentence, and turning suddenly on his heel, went down the trail with a cocked revolver in his hand.

"Thar man-for hear somethin'g," said Silver Belt to himself. "C 't b thar somebody has discovered the place where we have d the C. i-quito Rose."

Jose had already passed out of sight, and the silver prince was beginning to grow impatient when he suddenly reappeared with a puzzled expression of countenance.

"Cap'n, thar's a wolf about hyer, a sneakin' human wolf at that," he said.

"A spy?" flashed Silver Belt.

"Suthin' ov ther kind."

"Id you see him?"

"No, but I heard his steps. See hyer that individual he ter e caged afore we go a step further in this game. Do e. I say," and then Gila Jose spoke in a lower tone of voice. "Off we ar, cap'n—bound for old Tucson. Thar's more a tiger thar w'ith fl'htl' not a durned beast in this kentry!"

Silver Belt saw at once through Gila Jose's trick, for he answered gayly:

"Well break u more'n one lair, old pard. Come! On we ar for Tucson!"

Both men had seated themselves in the saddles but the steeds had not proceeded far ere Jose slipped to the ground, motioning to his companion to go ahead.

"N let ther spy come up," said Jose to himself, and with eager mien, he crept back toward the spot directly above the cavern, and crouched at the foot of the dark wall of rock.

For awhile he was inclined to believe that the spy, whoever he was, was his equal in keenness; but all at once a footstep reached his ears, and then a figure glided into view.

"Walkin' right inter ther trap, eh?" ejaculated Jose with his eyes riveted on the apparition-like object. "Just a little nearer, my mountain hollyhock, an' then we'll see what this prowlin' means."

Nearer and nearer came the person who had suddenly come in sight and within five feet of Jose's position he stopped and listened.

A minute later Silver Belt's pard saw him take a coil of rope from beneath his jacket and slowly uncoil it in the starlight.

"Goin' down ter ther gal? We'll see about that!" hissed Jose under his breath, and all at once he went forward and dropped one of his bronze hands upon the person's shoulders.

"No runnin'! it's me—Gila Jose," he said with a cool chuckle as the surprised person wheeled with a cry of astonishment. "Kinder not lookin' for me hyer just now, eh?"

There was no reply, and the man from Rock-Dust looked into the face of a youth who could not have passed his seventeenth year.

"Do yer often take such mountain trips like this, Feather Frank?" continued Jose, showing his teeth.

"Not often," said the youth who was the boy met by Black-Horse Steve before Felix's cabin in Rock-Dust when the Arizonian rode into the camp after the destruction of Ranch Robin.

"Not often, but sometimes!" laughed Jose.

"Perhaps."

"Wal, ye'r playin' spy on mighty dangerous ground, Feathery," was the continuance.

"What war ye goin' ter do with that lasso?"

"Swing myself over the cliff with it."

"For what?"

"Ah! you know, Gila Jose!" said the boy. "Just before sundown I looked up the gulch wall from away below us, an' thought I saw somebody standin' in an openin'—"

"You did, eh?" interrupted Jose, and one of his hands encircled the youth's arm. "You thought you saw some one, an' you war goin' ter satisfy yerself on that p'int?"

"Yes," and the youth's eyes dropped to the lasso as he spoke.

"Now, take my advice, Feathery, an' go back ter Rock-Dust without tryin' ther experiment," continued Jose, giving Feather Frank a look calculated to terrify him. "Nobody ever came

out ahead investigatin' in these parts. Go back. Thar's the trail, but you know it as well as I do."

The youth straightened instantly, and threw into Gila Jose's face a look that breathed defiance.

"Not goin', eh?" cried the man. "Coil yer rope, an' trot. I don't suggest now, Feathery; by Heavens! I command!"

That was enough; it confirmed the discovery the young Rock-Duster had made, and he was not disposed to yield obedience to the man whose tricks and villainy he knew so well. All at once, with a vigorous effort, he broke from Gila Jose's grasp, and was starting back, when the big fellow darted at him with an oath.

"Not yet, my cab' daisy. I shatter every bone in yer body," he shouted.

"I'll defend myself first!" was the retort, and he half-coiled lasso swung once over the boy's head, and the next instant it was laid with a cutting blow across Gila Jose's face.

I drew blood and an oath to one and the same time, but it did not check the charge of the mountain desperado.

He came down upon Feather Frank like a plunging lion, dashed the lasso aside, and seized him before he could lift it for the second blow.

"Ter ther stroke, Feathery, I'll rob Rock-Dust ov her youngest citizen!" leaped from Jose's throat, as his hands gripped the youth's arms and lifted him from his feet. "You wanted ter go down over ther trail, an' you shall! If har should be a coroner's inquest over yer remainin', ther verdict'll be, 'death from an accidental tumble, an' nobody to blame!'"

Feather Frank felt himself being borne through the air, and rapidly toward the fringe of the mountain trail. In the hands of the desperado, whose blood he had drawn, he expected no mercy, and he sealed his lips, resolved to go to his doom without a whining cry.

Three hasty strides bore Gila Jose to the edge of the cliff, and Feather Frank shot instantly above his head.

"Down yer go, Feathery!" he exclaimed. "I never expected our acquaintance'd come ter this; but yer ter blame, not this Arizona chick. No prayers, Feathery—no requests?"

"None!" said the boy, resolutely.

"All aboard fer ther bottom ov ther canyon! When yer land, Feathery—"

"Here! what ar' you goin' to do?" interrupted a voice, that broke Jose's last sentence and made him turn, with the boy still poised above his head.

"I'm just in time, ain't I?" continued the interrupter, who was Silver Belt. "War you goin' ter pitch the boy over the trail cliff?"

"That's ther haft ov it, cap'n!" snarled Jose.

"Is he the spy you dropped back to watch?"

"Yes."

"Why, he's but a boy!" said the silver prince, looking into Frank's face.

"A young rattler's bite kills like ther old one's. This galoot hed a lasso, an' I caught 'im goin' down ter—you know whar, cap'n!"

A scowl crossed Silver Belt's countenance.

"Is this true, boy?" he inquired.

"Gila Jose says it is."

"But what do you say?"

"The same, perhaps."

Silver Belt smiled faintly at the reply.

"He's a cunnin' rooster," said Jose; "I've known 'im ever since he war a midget. We've toted 'im from camp ter camp till we finally reached Rock-Dust."

"Oh, you know him, then?"

"Wal, I should whisper."

"Can't you answer for him, Jose?"

"What! d'yer mean fer me ter say thet he'll not pry inter our bizness ef we let 'im go now?"

cried Jose, astonished.

"Won't you be security for him?"

"Not by a mighty sight! Me answer fer thet mountain fox's tricks—not much, cap'n! Safety lies in action now. Ther bird's now in ther hand; 'twill be dangerous ter send 'im back to ther bush. Hyer! let me end it all in a jiffy. Over ther cliff he goes, cap'n. Dead snakes never bite—never! Them's Gila Jose's sentiments, anyway!"

Feather Frank, who had been lowered to the ground, was suddenly raised again above the Rock-Duster's head, and Gila Jose stepped toward the brink of the cliff with murder in his eye.

"No! not that deed now!" cried Silver Belt, seizing Jose's arm and dragging it down. "I'll give the boy a chance. When I can't best a kid, I want somebody to scatter my brains over an Arizona trail. Put the boy down, an' take yer hands off him."

"Let him go, cap'n?"

"Yes."

"Thar he is," and Gila Jose stepped back and left Feather Frank free in the trail. "Ye'r boss hyer, Silver Belt; but mind, I tell yer ther time'll come when you'll wish you hed let Gila Jose throw this young rattler to ther bottom ov this canyon."

"I'll take the risk, Jose," said Silver Belt, eying the youth. "I secured the boy I've got in Tucson by savin' his life."

"But not this young viper," and Gila Jose shoved Feather Frank away. "Come! I'm ready ter go now. Feathery wants ter try his lasso."

He must not do that," spoke Silver Belt in menacing tones.

"I'll prevent it. You'll not me do thet, eh, cap'n?"

Before there was a reply of any kind, Gila Jose had possessed himself of the youth's lasso, and the next minute was cutting it in different places with his keen-edged ten-inch bowie.

"Thar! I guess thet puts end ter his proposed inspection," he cried, throwing the severed pieces to the ground. "Look! he tands thar with tiger eyes an' clincher hand. Come, cap'n, You've spoil on picnic. I'll loss thet thet ki gives yer another." And the two sports walked off, leavin' Feather Frank alone.

CHAPTER VIII.

RUN DOWN.

Not a few of the citizens of Rock-Dust were surprised on the following morning to see two men emerge from Gila Jose's haunt.

One was, of course, Jose, and the other a handsome man physically, and to all but Jose, a stranger in the haunted camp.

At some hour between dark and midnight the couple had taken possession of the cabin, where they had remained undisturbed, and the first intimation Rock-Dust had of their presence was their appearance in the street.

Jose led his companion straight to a certain shanty where liquid nourishment was to be had at fifty cents a drink, and the early callers there were severally introduced to Silver Belt, the bonanza pard of Tucson, and asked to "take suthin'" at Jose's expense.

In a very short time Silver Belt was on good terms with the denizens of the camp, and Jose busied himself in finding out what they thought of their new visitor.

"He's not hyer ter locate," Jose always explained when questioned aside about Silver Belt. "He's on his way Northwest on business, an' I urged 'im ter stop hyer awhile ter see ther pards ov Rock-Dust n' ter leave a little ov his lucre among us, ov which he hez plenty. Look at him; see what shoulders an' what eyes! I've seen thet individual afore, b'hoys, an' my private opinion is thet he's a b-a-d man in a tussle."

It would be proper to say here that the preponderance of opinion coincided with Jose's expressed views, for the pards of Rock-Dust had carefully inspected Silver Belt from every stand-point. But they could not see why he had selected Gila Jose for his friend, when there were better men in camp.

Nobody cared about the mines that day; Jose's hint that Silver Belt had plenty of money to leave in Rock-Dust, if urged to play, and the prospect of plucking a fat pigeon formed a temptation which the Rock-Dusters could not resist.

The one saloon which the camp afforded was not large enough to afford amusement for its entire population, therefore, when Silver Belt signified his willingness to play for money, the whole party adjourned to the end of the street, and the games began.

The man from Tucson had a reason for remaining in Rock-Dust till night, at least. He wanted to see whether Feather Frank the boy baffled among the mountains would come to camp, and he had resolved to lengthen out his journey.

Jose was watchful, and while Silver Belt amused the Rock-Dusters, he kept his eyes on the trails that led from the mountains, watching them with the patience and pertinacity of a faithful dog.

Silver Belt was careful to lose and win just enough to keep the mountain men in good humor, and at last he saw the sun sink behind the ragged hills without having disturbed the hilarity of the camp.

"That young fox, cap'n, hasn't showed up," whispered Jose, at the ears of Silver Belt as the sun finally went down, throwing the shadow of rock and tree over the camp.

"He may know we're here, an' keeps off," laughed Silver Belt. "Why, he needn't fear me. I wouldn't twist a finger if he came."

"Consarn him! I'd probably wring his neck!" growled Gila Jose. "You don't know 'im, I do; that's ther difference twixt us, cap'n. He's up ter some deviltry out thar."

"That kid, Jose?"

"Thet same boy whose lasso I cut up last night. What ar' ye waitin' fer hyer?"

"For two men who have gone to their shanties to get their last dust."

"Yer bet ag'in' yer game, cap'n?"

"Yes."

"Two fools, I say. But throw up ther game hyer. We must be off if we reach Red Chick afore to-morrer night."

"I can't. I promised to wait for them."

"Oh, yer did, eh? Then I'll go down an' take up my old station. I'll hev ther horses thar. Come ter me when you've plucked ther Rock-Dust pigeons."

"I will."

Jose moved away with a glance at the crowd which awaited with Silver Belt the return of the two Rock-Dusters who had gone after their lost stakes.

He was plainly impatient; there seemed a sudden fear in Gila Jose's eyes; he had said that he was watching for the boy when, in fact, he had fears that some one else was coming.

"Samson may be his match, but I don't b'lieve it," he had murmured time after time. "Sometimes it takes two men to watch one. Silver Belt may rest easy; but hang me ef I do."

The sentry paced back and forth under the trees while the man from Tucson played with the men who seemed fascinated by the games that relieved them of their money. He was restless, impatient; his very motions showed this, and every minute he would glance over his shoulder toward Rock-Dust, and curse Silver Belt's delay.

"Confound it! don't he know I'm waitin' for him?" he cried. "I've got ther hosses by yon rock, all ready for ther gallop ter Red Chick. See hyer, cap'n: ef yer don't hurry, somebody 'll come, an' I won' insure it ter be ther kid."

And "somebody" did come, and that in a manner totally unexpected by Gila Jose.

Almost suddenly a horse and his rider loomed up in the lightest spot for many yards around, and Jose's hand moved involuntarily toward his six-shooter as he started back with an exclamation of surprise parting his lips.

"I know 'im! See 'im once an' you never forget 'im!" said Jose. "Thet man's presence hyer tells me thet Samson, with all his cunnin' failed ter keep 'im in Tucson. Now, what will ther cap'n say?"

Jose thought himself unperceived by the man who had so suddenly appeared, and was drawing the revolver already cocked when something very like a lengthening serpent shot over the horse's head and straight at him.

In a second Gila Jose knew what it was, and he threw up two bronze hands to circumvent the stranger's intention, but quick as he was, and Jose was quick, he was too late.

The black noose of a lasso settled over his head, and suddenly, as it tightened, he was jerked almost off his feet.

"Jerusalem! thar's only one lasso on top o' ground thet kin do thet," grated Jose as he went to work to relieve himself of the terrible coil.

"Cut that rope, or try it, an' I'll land you in hades!" roared a voice at his ear and Silver Belt's pard looked up into the face of a man who leaned from the saddle, and was regarding him with two blazing eyes. "So, I have found you if not your pard, Gila Jose. You war waitin' for him, I suppose."

Jose said "yes" before he knew he had spoken, and the capt'n, Black-Horse Steve, laughed at the manner he displayed.

"My silken lasso has never caught a man amiss," he went on. "Don't squirm there, Jose, old fellow. It only tightens the cord. Yes, look at my horse's feet, they're muffled just the least bit ain't they? an' thet's how I came ter steal a march on you. Silver Belt's in camp, eh, Gila?"

Jose made no reply; this time he watched his tongue, resolved not to betray the man to whom he had sworn eternal fidelity.

"Very well. We'll go up an' see, Jose," laughed the Arizonian, and the black horse leaped forward, throwing Jose off his feet and hurling him heavily to the ground.

The movement and its results were so unexpected by the Rock-Duster, that he could not meet them, and when he attempted to regain his feet, he was being dragged over the road in a

very unceremonious manner, and heard these words distinctly spoken.

"Look out, Gila Jose! If you try to get up I'll give my horse the spurs an' we'll go up ter Rock-Dust like rockets! Besides, I'm liable ter use ther trigger on slight occasions."

That was warning enough, and grinding his teeth till they cracked, Gila Jose was forced to hold his peace, but did some terrible thinking.

"Thar'll be a pic-nic when this Arizona cyclone reaches Rock-Dust an' mebbe it'll result in my favor," he mused. "Things can't get much worse for me over what they ar' now, but sometimes ther fryin'-pan is better nor ther fire."

A journey has an end, and Jose's forced one terminated when he began to think that every particle of skin would soon be rubbed from his bones.

Black-Horse Steve rode into Rock-Dust, and saw the light that revealed Silver Belt and his antagonist. The game which had had but few intermissions during the day was still running, and just before he was discovered, a voice sung out.

"We quit for to-night, gentlemen. You can't say 'aven' given us good chances ter get even, thet we hev'n' played a squar' game. No more playin' to-night."

"O, cour's no, when a' ther dust's on one side," growled a broad-shouldered Rock-Duster, breaking out from the table under the trees.

"Ain't ther another ounce in Rock-Dust ter give fortune another tilt?"

"I wouldn't reopen the game if thar war a thousand ounces here."

"Yes, yo' will, Captain Silver Belt!" exclaimed Black-Horse Steve, at the sound of whose voice every man who led. "I'm hyer to play you a game that will cost the loser his life. Ha, you know me!"

Silver Belt had straightened, and was looking across the table at the man who confronted him in the saddle.

"Samson played his game, and I beat him; now, sir, I play you! What I've I to bet against your pile, eh? The man at the end of my lasso!"

The crowd had parted and drawn back, and Silver Belt saw a man at the end of the rope!

CHAPTER IX.

INTERFERED WITH.

BLACK-HORSE STEVE was looking directly into the face of the silver desperado, who had come up from the saddle with Gila Jose. It was look for look, defiance for defiance, and the dark-faced crowd eyed the pair intently.

The next move, all expected, would be the display of revolvers and the fall of one or two human bodies.

Steve, the Arizonian, saw the quick glance sent by Silver Belt toward the burly figure lying at the end of the lariat a short distance behind his horse, and a smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"I bet the bully at the end of my rope, sir; what is your stake?" suddenly continued Steve to Silver Belt. "Remember, sir, that you are to lay a game of some sort with me. I am here for that purpose. What shall it be?"

"Anything to yer likin'" was the instant response. "I am always ready. In the first place, slip yer noose."

"From Jose, back thar?"

"Yes."

"Your friend, eh?"

"My friend!"

"No," said Steve, his lips meeting firmly behind the little syllable. "He's fixed for the present. Silver Belt, I have found the man who sent Samson this way a few days since with a bottle, under whose cork lurked death. That poison killed Felix. Ah! you know who Felix war."

"I know," said the Tucson desperado—"I know pretty much of ther history of ther three Lower Californians. But thet's a bad charge of yers, Black-Horse Steve. I ginerally strike with lead or steel."

"But this time Samson an' the man at my lasso's end did the work for you. I know it, Silver Belt. I never lost a trail after striking it, an' ther one I struck in Felix's cabin has led me here—to you!"

"An' it's blood you want?" grated Silver Belt.

"Satisfaction!"

"For what?"

"For Felix's death an' for the desolation of Ranch Robin; for Rolfo an' his ward!"

Those who were watching the silver sport narrowly saw him give a slight start.

"Cl'ar a ring for 'em ef they're goin' ter fight!" sung out Noisy Dan one of the foremost

characters of Rock-Dust, and a six-foot specimen of humanity. "Give 'em room an' fair play. Thar's no kickin' 'lowed in Rock-Dust; no backin' out in this saints' paradise ov ther silver region!"

The men of the camp drew back, eager to see the two men thus brought face to face settle their differences in the prevailing method of the country.

Gila Jose had been rendered insensible by his rough journey from the scene of his capture to the gaming-table, and lay on the ground still in the lasso's coil and unpitied by his former comrades, who despised him for having brought to camp a sport who had fleeced them out of their precious dust.

Black-Horse Steve clutched a revolver in his right hand, and leaned toward Silver Belt from his saddle.

"If it's satisfaction you demand, satisfaction it shall be," suddenly said the man from Tucson. "No man lives who can say that I ever refused him that. Let us put ourselves on an equality, an' may the best man ride alone from Rock-Dust within the next half-hour."

Silver Belt came around the rough table with glittering eyes as he spoke; not for a moment had he taken them from Steve save to glance twice at Gila Jose powerless to render assistance, and probably dead.

"On an equality? Certainly, though you don't deserve it," said the Arizonian, and the next moment he slipped dextrously from the saddle and struck the ground just as Silver Belt gained the cleared space in front of him.

"What's yer weapons, gents?" asked Noisy Dan who had made himself master of ceremonies without the semblance of an invitation. "We fight hyer accordin' to ther code, an' no non-residents ov this city shall infringe ther rules. Face ter face ye ar', thar. Name yer weapons; bowies or revolvers? an' at what distance? Whoop 'er up lively, 'Liza Jan'!"

By this time the two enemies were confronting each other with about ten feet between them.

"As I came here to meet you, sir," said Black-Horse Steve, "I will give you the advantage of choice of weapons. Choose."

"Very well. An' as I want to meet the man who openly accuses me of poisonin' a fellow human, I'll accommodate you at once. I choose revolvers at ten paces. Stand back thar, gentlemen, an', if I'm not mistaken, you'll see one good shot to-night."

"Thet's bizness! Stand back thar, men gophers, an' let ther gents hev full swing!" again rung out the stentorian voice of Noisy Dan. "When two men like these distinguished individuals come all ther way from Tucson ter give us a diversion like this, we should give 'em a squar' shake. Thar ye ar', gents. Shall I drop my hat?"

Noisy Dan had taken off his hat, and placed himself about midway between the two men, though a little to one side, and was holding out between thumb and finger the dirtiest sombrero to be found in Arizona.

"It'll suit me for that chapter drop his hat for signal," said Silver Belt whose right hand held a cocked revolver along his leg as Steve also did.

"All right! Drop the hat!"

Noisy Dan shouted out a boisterous "all right, gents!" and the desperate crowd expected to see the sombrero descend toward the ground within the next ten seconds.

"Drop 'er, Noisy! what ar' yer clingin' to ther hat fer?" whispered voices behind the Rock-Duster.

"Hang it! I'm kivered myself!" was the answer. "Look straight ahead ov me. Ef I drop ther hat, I'll tumble myself. Somebody take my place!"

Already the entire crowd was looking toward the spot designated by Noisy Dan, and there to their utter astonishment they beheld a boy at whose shoulders was a rife that covered the self-appointed master of ceremonies.

"Feather Frank!" fell from the lips of several. "See hyer, boy! don't ye know ye'r interferin' with men's sport? Drop thet Winchester, an' let ther performance proceed."

But the rife was not lowered an inch, nor did the boy who had so suddenly appeared on the scene take a backward step.

If Gila Jose had been conscious at the time, he would doubtless have upbraided Silver Belt in no gentle tones for sparing the boy's life only a few hours before; but as it was, the men of Rock-Dust were cursing him enough.

Noisy Dan still held his hat between thumb and finger, and it was likely that he had taken a new purchase on it for fear that it might acci-

dentally slip from his grasp, and thus precipitate a very unfortunate melee.

"There's to be no fight while I'm around," suddenly spoke the boy over the rifle that still covered Noisy Dan. "Put on yer hat an' step back, Noisy. An' you two men, rebelt yer revolvers. This duel is off!"

"That's ther durndest meanest interference I ever heard ov!" growled Noisy Dan, not forgetting to return his dirty hat promptly to his head. "Flay me fer a 'Pache ef I don't git even with ther kid fer it. Gents, I'm sorry ter inform yer that ther young gopher yonder hez spiled ther fight fer ther present. Ez he says, gents, ther duel ar' off."

Silver Belt had glanced but once at Feather Frank, and that glance had enabled him to recognize in him the youth he had encountered the night before.

"Maybe I had better let Jose have his way when he had the boy in his clutches," he said to himself. "He's here now in my way, an' his accursed Winchester prevents me from killin' the last of the three brothers. But I'll do it yet. It's a long while till mornin', an'—"

"Back to back thar, gentlemen," suddenly interrupted Feather Frank. "Thar's ter be no fight in Rock-Dust to-night. I owe you a good turn, Silver Belt. I haven't forgotten what you did last night. I pay that debt by breaking up this fight for vengeance. Turn yer backs on each other. Thar! now walk away."

Silver Belt at the mercy of the boy's repeater, obeyed with the look and the sullenness of a baffled tiger; Black-Horse Steve, disappointed, but in a better humor.

Within a minute the two Arizonians were many feet apart, and three strides carried the boy interloper to Steve's side.

"I didn't want you to take any chances with that man," he said, meeting the lassoer's rebuke calmly. "Silver Belt is cat-quick with the trigger."

"So am I."

"I believe it, but I take no risks. I know where the girl is."

"Rolfo's ward?"

"It must be she."

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Black-Horse Steve. "An' is she near?"

"In the mountains near at hand. I would have found her last night if the man in your coil thar had not interfered. Your lasso will reach her."

"An' Rolfo?"

"I know nothin' about him, though I think the girl is alone."

"Come, then! We will find her at once. I'll release my captive first; then, for the Chiquito Rose! After all, boy, I thank you for your interference."

The Arizonian stepped to where Gila Jose lay bruised and unconscious in the lasso's loop, and quickly shook him out of it.

"Isn't he dead?" exclaimed Frank.

"No."

"It's almost a pity," was the reply. "A craftier sport than Gila Jose never slung a revolver or thumbed a mountain deck!"

"I'll risk him, boy," laughed Black-Horse Steve dextrously coiling his lariat as he stepped toward his horse. "The journey he had to-night the devil-wretch will long remember. It's but the beginnin' ov the settlement I have with him."

As the handsome Arizonian threw himself upon the back of his black horse Feather Frank appeared at his side.

"To the mountains! to Rolfo's ward as you call her!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, boy; and then for Rolfo himself!"

"Look out for Silver Belt!"

"For the man whose life you saved for doin' you a good turn last night, eh? We'll not forget him. I long to see the girl. She can tell me all. Come, boy! To the Rose of Ranch Robin!"

The next moment Black-Horse Steve was riding off with Frank walking at his side.

CHAPTER X.

THE TUCSON TRAP.

Riding cautiously up the mountain, a giant on a horse in every respect as powerful as himself.

"I'll watch the place awhile," mused the man. "I have an idea of what's goin' ter happen. He has met the boy called Feather Frank—the young imp I should have let Gila Jose finish last night, an' he will tell him that he has found the Arizona girl. They will come together, an' I will show this last of the three Californians a trick that'll make me winner in this game."

The mountain trail was narrow and gently as-

cending, and the solitary rider kept on until he had reached a certain elevation far above Rock-Dust and some miles away.

At last he dismounted at a spot which, to him, must have looked familiar, for he had been there before and during the past forty-eight hours.

"Now let 'em come," parted his lips as he guided his horse to some bushes that grew alongside the trail and got behind them as well as he was able. "If I'm not fixed for Black-Horse Steve now, I'd like ter know when I ever will be. Come along, Stephen, you an' yer new boy pard. I long ter show you Silver Belt's best trick."

Not a sound disturbed the vigils of the stalwart sport leaning against the horse concealed by the bushes; man and animal seemed a part of the mountain wall, but they were not stone, for the former moved slightly at times as he looked up and down the trail starlit enough to be discernible some distance.

More than an hour passed, and then came the first sound to reach the silver sport's ears since taking up his station.

"Straight ter ther Tucson trap!" laughed Silver Belt, while he listened to the approach of some one. "A few more steps, my guileless pards, an' ther explorations ov this night will terminate abruptly."

He saw two figures approach his station, and his eyes presently enabled him to see that one, a man, was mounted, and the other a boy afoot.

"Just as I expected! I could have sworn ter it," he muttered. "Feather Frank has told about his diskivery, an' Steve is hyer ter see ther girl."

There was no longer any doubt of the identity of the pair who had come to Silver Belt's station; Black-Horse Steve and the boy from Rock-Dust had come to find the ranchman's ward, and one, perhaps both, would go down to the cavern in the wall over the Arizonian's lasso.

More than ever like a statue now looked Silver Belt, his handsome figure unperceived by Steve and his young pard.

"Hyar! give me the lasso," said the Arizonian. "Mark the place whar it's to be put over the ledge, an' I'll see Rolfo's ward in a jiffy. No; you can't lower me, boy. I'm too heavy for you, but I'll fasten the cord around that rock-tree an' you kin keep guard."

"I can watch for Silver Belt, eh?" said the boy.

"For the man I long to meet an' to pay back for the blow struck at Ranch Robin," was the answer, in tones that brought a mad glare to the eyes of the Tucson sport.

Black-Horse Steve now approached the trail wall from which projected a living tree in a singular manner, and proceeded to fasten his lasso to the trunk.

"How many feet down to the cage, Frank?" he asked, speaking over his shoulder to the boy looking on.

"About twenty."

"I'll shorten the rope accordin'. Now thar we ar'. Thar's no danger of that lasso lettin' me down to the bottom of the canyon. I've hung to it before, boy, an' when more than one life depended on it, too."

Following the lasso back to the edge of the cliff, Black-Horse Steve divested himself of his hat and jacket, which he placed on the saddle of the horse that stood near, and slipped the "stirrup" of the lariat over one foot to try it.

"Down we go now, Feather," he said in merry tones to the boy standing by. "Keep a sharp eye on the lookout. In Arizona a man must never sleep."

Black-Horse Steve dropped the black lasso over the fringe of the cliff, and then lowered his supple body after it, but kept the hairy cord wrapped about one arm.

Curiosity drew Feather Frank to the spot, and he saw the daring Arizonian lower himself gradually until his shoulders were below the bank.

Silver Belt, too, saw all these movements, for he stood not twenty feet away, in his hand a bowie whose ten-inch blade was wide and keen.

It was his time for work, and he was not the one to play merciful with the life of the man he hated in his hands.

"Now, I'll show you the Tucson trick!" he exclaimed, stepping toward the rope stretched taut from tree to cliff, showing that the weight of Black-Horse Steve was still upon it.

Three strides the kind he took—they seemed panther-bounds—brought him to the lasso, and over it the bowie was poised for a moment.

"To ther bottom of ther canyon—not ter ther Chiquito Rose!" he almost hissed, and then the blade came down on the rope, and it parted!

There was more than the snap of the rope in

the result of Silver Belt's cut; a wild cry rung out on the air, and Feather Frank recoiled with a shout of horror.

"Oh, it's me, boy," said the man from Tucson, as he met the little Rock-Duster and seized his arm before he could make an effort toward defense. "It war a slick trick, eh?—one Black-Hoss Steve warn't lookin' for! D'yer think he'll find ther Rose ov Ranch Robin now? What's ther distance ter ther bed ov ther canyon? I'm not familiar with this part ov ther kentry."

The voice of the sleek rough had a devilish sound to the boy who was compelled to listen.

He pictured with horror the body which had fallen a thousand feet through starlit space, and imagined it lying on the bed of the canyon bruised out of shape—Black-Horse Steve at the end of his last and most fatal trail!

And he—Feather Frank—was in the grip of the man who had coolly cut the lariat and precipitated the avenger of Ranch Robin to a terrible doom. What mercy could he ask or expect at Silver Belt's hands?

"What mercy do you ask?" suddenly continued the silver sport. "You know what you did a while ago in camp; you know what you told Steve about the bird in the cage below us. You war his guide, his friend; now, what mercy, Feather Frank?"

"Well, I expect none at your hands," was the answer. "A vulture seldom releases ther young goat it catches in ther mountains."

"Thet's true. Last night, on this very spot, I saved you from ther clutches of Gila Jose—Steve's last catch. For what you've done to-night, you ought ter foller him!"

Feather Frank expected to.

"All right; it is yer chance!" he said, fearlessly.

"An' you won't beg?"

"No!"

"By Heaven! ye're ther very kid I want! I'm in luck! Git inter ther saddle thar."

"Black-Hoss Steve's?"

"Yes."

Feather Frank walked toward the Arizonian's horse, but with his arm still encircled by Silver Belt's bronze fingers.

He halted beside the horse, across whose saddle lay Steve's embroidered jacket and sombrero, and the next moment he was lifted to a seat upon them by the strength of the Tucson sport.

"We are goin' off, boy," said Silver Belt. "Ther bird in ther rock cage'll not suffer, fer Gila Jose will see ter that. See hyer; do you know ther trail ter Red Chick's camp?"

The boy looked astonished.

"Red Chick, the Apache?" he asked.

"Yes."

"It's one hundred miles from here."

"What ef it's five?" laughed Silver. "Do you know ther way?"

"I might find it."

"That's enough. Off we ar' now. Oh, I'm worse than ten tigers when I'm stirred up. Ef you've never heard ov Silver Belt, ther Bonanza King, before, ye're likely ter larn him thoroughly before we dissolve acquaintance. Good-by, Black-Hoss Stephen! Ther Tucson trick took ther red card ter-night—ha! ha! Thar's one man ther Silken Lasso'll never catch. Now fer Red Chick's camp!"

The two horses moved off before the echoes of Silver Belt's words had died away, and Feather Frank found himself riding Black-Horse Steve's famous steed alongside the Tucson sport, and watched by him like a hawk.

He had heard a thousand times of Red Chick, the most merciless, villainous and cunning of all the Apache raiders, and now he was going to his rendezvous!

It seemed a horrible dream to the boy, and he asked himself what was taking Silver Belt to Red Chick.

CHAPTER XI.

BY THE LASSO ROUTE.

"I FEEL as if I'd been dragged over a cor-duroy road at ther tail ov a Texas steer, an' if I've got a hull bone in my anatomy, I don't know it. But I'm livin' yet in spite ov ther infernal ride at ther eend ov a lasso—livin' ter get even with Black-Hoss Steve who missed it when he lled ter choke this Arizona wild-cat ter death!"

Gila Jose, who spoke thus, stood in his shanty situated near the western terminus of Rock-Dust's main street, and his dilapidated appearance certainly justified the idea that he had been dragged over a rough road at the tail of a Texas steer.

The time was about one hour after Black-Horse Steve's departure from the mining-camp, and Jose had recovered consciousness on the

floor of his shanty whither he had been carried by his companions, the pards of Rock-Dust. If the Rock-Duster could have heard some of the expressions made over him, he would have concluded that there were but few sympathetic hearts among the silver hills, for he was roundly cursed for guiding to the place the prince of gamblers, who had coolly fleeced the pards out of their dust.

He had been left on the rough boards of his cabin to recover at his leisure, or not to recover at all, Rock-Dust cared but little which, and he had disappointed the majority of its inhabitants by regaining consciousness.

"Wal, it's not so bad, arter all," he went on, finding that he could move about though his limbs were sore and his bones ached. "Shoot this mountain hollyhock for a sunflower, ef he doesn't git even with ther tiger-lily what dragged 'im inter this paradise! Whar's Silver Belt? Gone, ov course! An' Black-Hoss? Vamosed also. Hev they raced fer ther girl, er did they fight ter ther death hyer in Rock-Dust?"

Jose's questions were answered by Noisy Dan, who peeped in at that moment to see how he was getting along, and being seized by the proscribed Rock-Duster, he was forced to retail an account of the interrupted duel, and the departure of the enemies.

"Didn't git ter fight, eh, Noisy?" exclaimed Jose. "Got parted by thet young kid? Jest what I told ther cap'n last night. I hed ther youngster in my clutches, but he put in an' kept him from ther bottom ov—"

Gila Jose paused abruptly as if he had suddenly approached the threshold of a dangerous secret, for he was on the point of revealing the girl's captivity, and Noisy Dan was the last person to whom he could afford to trust information of this kind.

"From ther bottom ov what, Gila?" asked Noisy Dan.

"Oh, no difference. Ain't I gettin' out o' my head? Thet ride war enough ter shake an iron man ter pieces. Say, Noisy, what do they say about me?"

"About yer fetchin' thet card-sharp ter Rock-Dust?"

"Yes."

"Thar's a difference ov opinion," answered Noisy Dan evasively.

"But ther majority's ag'in' me, eh? Spit out ther truth, Noisy."

"Thet's about ther way it looks, Jose."

Gila Jose did not speak for a moment.

"Mebbe," he said; "mebbe, Noisy, a short absence on my part'd smoothe ther rough edges ov opinion. I guess I'll go."

"Go whar?" asked Noisy Dan.

"Out inter ther cold world," was the dolorous answer. "By heavens! when Gila Jose can't take keer ov himself among ther mountains, ye'll see fleas on ther moon!"

Noisy Dan, who was not much of a consoler, especially in the present case, for Silver Belt had stripped him of all his dust, found it an opportune moment to take his departure, and stealing from the shanty, he left Jose once more alone.

"Got Rock-Dust ag'in' me, eh?" suddenly grated Jose, while his eyes gleamed madly. "Wal, I'll take my departure without touchin' off ther powder; but one o' these times I'll set off ther whole durned magazine ov this silver Eden!"

Never, Gila Jose; the boast just made shall never be carried out, for the finger of fate has already marked you for doom.

In less than ten minutes the hated Rock-Duster had found the horse he usually rode, and armed to the teeth and full of vengeance, he left the camp unnoticed by its denizens who, with the exception of Noisy Dan, thought not of his departure.

As a matter of course, Jose rode toward the spot upon which the cavern in the cliff could be reached by a lasso, a stout sample of which dangled from the pommel of his saddle.

If Silver Belt had left Rock-Dust he had returned to the Chiquito Rose, the beautiful creature for whom he had destroyed Ranch Robin, and Jose was anxious to strike his trail, and to reunite himself with the man he had fetched up from Tucson at command.

The myriad stars of midnight were now glittering in the summer sky, and Jose, who was thoroughly familiar with the region, had no difficulty in keeping the ascending trail.

His unceremonious journey at the end of Black-Horse Steve's lariat was visible in his bruised face and torn clothes, but these reminders only served to keep his anger up. He thought of little beyond the pale of vengeance, and more than once he roundly cursed the Ari-

zonian who had pinioned his arms at his side with the Silken Lasso.

A genuine surprise awaited Gila Jose when he reached the trail directly above the cavern, for his quick eyes detected certain marks which told him that more than one person had been there since sundown.

"I'm a little late, for Silver Belt has come an' gone," he murmured, in a disappointed strain. "But I'll go down an' take a peep inter ther bird cage anyhow."

Depriving his horse of the lariat at the saddle, he went toward the leaning tree for the purpose of securing one end of it.

The next instant he recoiled with an ejaculation as if his hands had come in contact with a snake.

"Jerusalem! what's this?" he cried. "A cut lasso hangin' ter ther tree, by Jupiter! Who's been hyer? Somebody with a bowie ov course! Black-Horse Steve? Silver Belt! fer thar ar' silk ribbons to this piece. I feel 'em!"

This discovery was indeed a surprise to Gila Jose, and for almost a minute it completely took his breath.

He knew the Silken Lasso of the man on horseback, as Steve had been nicknamed; he had lately felt its tightening coil, and his painful joints still reminded him of its powers.

Jose did not let his wonder abate until he had struck a match, and by its light had examined the remains of the most famous and most dreaded lariat in Arizona.

"Sure enough! it's Black-Horse Steve's lasso!" he said. "I begin ter see through the hull thing. Silver Belt got ther start o' Steve; he came hyer an' waited with his ten-inch bowie. Stephen came accordin' ter expectations, an' tied his lasso hyer ter ther tree. He had found out thet ther Rose ov Ranch Robin war hyer. Somewhar! Who told 'im? Why; who but Feather Frank, ther kid ov Rock-Dust? Wal, over ther trail thar went Steve with Silver Belt watchin' all ther time with his knife. All at once knife an' lasso met; then somebody fell about a thousand feet through starlight. It war Silver Belt's picnic; it war also good-by Black-Hoss!"

Gila Jose ceased as his match went out, and then he began to fasten his own lasso to the tree just above the place where the remains of the Arizonian's rope encircled it.

He went to the edge of the cliff and dropped his lariat down, then lowered himself carefully over the edge and began the descent.

Gila Jose was large and well set, but he knew he had a strong lasso for support, and he went downward confident. He looked like some great weight dangling in the starlight twixt earth and sky, but moving earthward by degrees.

Inch by inch he went down the black lasso.

"Hyer I am!" he ejaculated as his feet struck a level spot and he swung his body slightly forward. "I've reached ther cage; now we'll see if Silver Belt's left ther bird in it."

Jose had reached the opening of the girl's cliff-prison in safety, and had but to swing his body forward to get a good purchase.

Bracing his feet against the wall, he swung outward into space, and then came back with good momentum.

But as his feet landed well within the opening, he found a hand at his throat!

"Thunders!" ejaculated the horrified Rock-Duster. "Thet's no woman's silken grip!"

"Drop the rope!" cried a stern voice at that moment, and at the same time the fingers of the enemy seemed to become the jaws of a steel vise. "By my life, Gila Jose, you've got nine lives like a cat!"

"An' so hev you, Black-Hoss Steve!"

"No thanks to you, though. Drop the rope—quick!"

Jose knew that the moment he released the lasso with both hands he would fall back, for all the strength of one man could not prevent him from tumbling from the cavern.

No wonder he hesitated.

"I compromise with no man from this time on!" continued the man, whose hand was at his throat. "Drop the rope, or be shot loose! Take your choice, Gila Jose."

At the same time the click of a revolver reached the Rock-Duster's ears. It meant doom.

"I guess I'm at ther end ov ther string," mused Jose. "Who thought I war descendin' inter a trap?"

"Quick! open yer hands!"

This command was savagely obeyed by Gila Jose; he released the lasso with an inward curse, but at the same moment he attempted to throw himself forward.

It was a bold effort, but a futile one.

Gila Jose jolted against the man on firm footing, and then felt the terrible grip at his throat relax.

Backward he went with a yell of horror at his lips, out into starlit space, and then down, down like a cannon-ball, toward the bottom of the canyon almost a thousand feet below.

Gila Jose had found the very man whom he thought crushed on the very rock-bed toward which he was shooting; he had let his curiosity carry him too far, and he had found the grip of the Arizonian more fatal than the coil of the Silken Lasso.

And the victor? He turned toward a beautiful girl and said with triumph;

"Fortune has sent us a lasso-route to safety, Rosa. This time it will not be cut!"

CHAPTER XII.

IN APACHE LAND.

In the waning light of a summer's day an athletic Indian walked beside a fine looking, though dark-faced white man within the confines of an Apache camp at the foot of a ridge of mountains which, to the north, reached the waters of the Colorado Chiquito.

"My brother came a long distance to find the ranchman," said the Apache, looking into his companion's face.

"I want to know what you did with him. I don't want more than one of those three Californians against me. Of course I've come a long ways arter information. I am anxious, as I hev a right ter be."

A look which seemed akin to a smile lurked in the red-skin's eyes, while the white man spoke.

"You went ter Ranch Robin accordin' ter agreement, Red Chick," continued the white. "Jose an' Samson hev told me all about ther swoop. You took Rolfo for yer share, they ther girl. I know whar she is; now, what hev you done with her?"

In an instant a flash of resentment lit up the depths of the Apache's eyes.

"Does Silver Belt doubt Red Chick?" he exclaimed. "Couldn't he wait till the Apache was ready to report?"

"I could, but I didn't," was the retort, showing that even in the Apache camp the Tucson sport had no fear. "I chose ter come hyer. I am deeply interested in this matter. I might have waited weeks for you. You hev a nice thing ov it hyer. After a raid you kin come inter this region an' laugh at yer victims. A hull regiment ov Arizonians wouldn't think ov invadin' Apachedom in search of you. But thet isn't it, Red Chick. You hev'n't told me what disposition you made ov Rolfo ov Ranch Robin."

"Red Chick will tell his brother; the ranchman escaped."

Silver Belt recoiled a step, and stared into the cool, immobile face of the red Centaur.

"Got away, you say? Rolfo get out ov yer clutches, Red Chick? I don't believe it!"

The Indian said nothing, but raised his right arm and pointed silently to the south.

"Speak! I want words, not signs!" cried the man from Tucson.

"Very well. Rolfo has gone toward the land of the warmer winds!" said Red Chick quietly.

"An' you let him go? You did not follow?" exclaimed Silver Belt almost beside himself with suppressed passion. "Was that in the bargain, chief? I didn't pay you ter swoop down upon ther ranch, an' then ter spare thet man. Samson an' Jose did ther part; they caged ther Arizona lark, but you hev failed ter fulfill yer part ov ther agreement."

It was evident that Silver Belt had raised the ire of the Apache, for no sooner had he finished, than Red Chick turned on his heel and deliberately walked off.

"Confound the traitor! I could drop him in his tracks!" hissed the Arizonian, allowing his hand to creep toward a revolver in his belt, as he eyed the red savagely. "I have penetrated Apachedom to find Rolfo of Ranch Robin alive an' gone away—back ter ther old stampin'-ground! Trust an Injun out o' sight, an' get cheated!"

Meanwhile, Red Chick the Apache was walking off as complacently as if Silver Belt was a thousand miles away; his very coolness exasperated the Tucson sport.

"I'll know something before I leave this camp," he went on, seeing that the Indian continued to ignore him. "You may run this ranch, but yer followers aren't incorruptible. I know an Apache's weakness as well as you know a good horse, Red Chick, an' I'll touch some ov 'em on their weak spots before I leave."

Silver Belt and Feather Frank had reached the rendezvous of the Apaches a short time before sundown.

They had traveled twelve hours at a good gallop, from the spot where the Arizonian cut the Silken Lasso for Black-Horse Steve, and while Silver Belt conversed with Red Chick, the boy was taking care of the two well-blown horses, surrounded and watched by some of the most villainous-looking red-skins above ground.

Eager to know what had been Rolfo's fate, Silver Belt had entered the lands of the Apaches. He might have feared that Red Chick's treacherous nature had played him false, although on previous occasions the Apache had served him well.

"I know the braves who were with him on that raid," mused Silver Belt, while he watched the red-skin. "Gila Jose told me their names, an' I'll just rake up a little information while I'm hyer. If Rolfo has escaped, back we go, my young kid. I'll know what kind o' game Red Chick's playin'."

The Apache camp was neither large nor difficult of threading; there were no regular streets, but the lodges, or tepees, were scattered promiscuously over the ground, and were easily seen in the waning light.

From the first moment of their appearance in the Indian camp Silver Belt and Feather Frank were marked individuals—the gamester especially. The under-warriors knew that he had come for the purpose of seeing Red Chick, the head chief, and were not disposed to interrupt the confab; but they cast covetous eyes upon his elegant silver-mounted revolvers, his laced sombrero, and his lithe-limbed horse.

He was followed by fifty pairs of eyes as he walked about the camp, and the day had departed when he reappeared suddenly to the boy.

He was in no good humor, and Feather Frank was unaware of his presence until his fingers encircled his arm.

"I guess we'll go back," he snapped madly. "The head serpent ov this rattlesnake-nest is an infernal traitor!"

"What!" cried the boy. "Did you trust an Apache?"

"No; I trusted a snake. Come! let us get out o' this den. By Heaven! I wish I had my revolver at Red Chick's head just outside the camp. One hundred mountain miles for nothing! time lost, an' ther deuce ter pay in general."

Feather Frank, who stood by the two horses, from which he had not removed his gaze for a moment since entering the camp, turned toward his steed as Silver Belt finished.

The group of Indians who had been watching the boy had withdrawn a few steps, where they had halted like a pack of wolves driven back by the torch of a hunter.

"What hev them reds been doin'?" whispered Silver Belt with a glance toward the Apaches.

"Hev they tried ter plunder ther hosses?—hev they threatened?"

"Nothing of the kind, but I don't like their looks."

"No? Curse 'em! They're all alike—ther hull litter! I thought thar war honor in Red Chick, if thar war any in a livin' red; but he's a rascal."

"An' he betrayed you?"

"Sold me out!" hissed Silver Belt. "He took the pledge of a man when he had my gold under his blanket. He let the prisoner go!"

"Rolfo?"

"Yes, Rolfo; I guess you know now who I mean," said Silver Belt. "Ther agreement war—wal, no matter what, boy. It'd do yer no good ter know. Throw yerself on ther hoss. We've not hed a long rest, but we've got ter git out o' hyer. I wish I could leave a fuse behind an' blow this whole camp ter Hades!"

Feather Frank threw himself into the saddle without a word, and Silver Belt did the same at the same moment.

The heads of the steeds were turned toward the southern confines of the Indian camp, and the Apaches drew aside to let them pass.

The mission to Apachedom had resulted in a manner that enraged the silver prince from Tucson. His enemy, Rolfo of Ranch Robin, had escaped from his power, and was at large. What if he should go South and find Rosa? What if he should unite the pardos of Rock-Dust, and all swear vengeance against him?

These thoughts filled Silver Belt's mind as he rode from the dangerous Apache camp; but they were brought to a sudden ending in the first pass, for a hand suddenly gripped his bridle, and a voice exclaimed:

"Hello! Cap'n! Is it you?"

Silver Belt knew the voice in an instant.

"Samson!" he cried.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FRESH TRAIL.

FEATHER FRANK leaned forward, somewhat startled by the voice, and looked curiously into the face of the speaker.

He saw Samson for the first time, and the giant's salutation told him that he and Silver Belt were friends. Samson rode a powerful horse whose pantings were evidences of hard riding, and Feather Frank felt that some important mission had fetched the bronze giant into the Apache country.

The unexpected encounter seemed to take Silver Belt's breath, but in a moment he exclaimed:

"In ther name ov Heaven! what fetched you hyer? I left yer in Tucson with a command which you didn't obey."

There was stern rebuke in the silver sport's tones, and Samson felt the cut.

"Wal, didn't I try ter?" he snapped. "What kin a fellar do arter he's done his best?"

"You got my message?"

"Yes."

"You war ter keep Black-Horse Steve in Tucson?"

"That's what it said."

"But he didn't stay worth a continental!"

"So it seems, cap'n. You've heard ov 'im since."

"I should say I have, ay, an' seen 'im, too."

"Not face to face?" cried Samson.

"Face ter face."

"An' nobody got hurt?"

"Nobody."

"Whar war yer hands?"

"At the trigger ov ther best weapon in Arizona! Ask thar kid thar why nobody war hurt," and Silver Belt threw a hasty glance at Feather Frank. "He held ther dead drop on us an' declared ther duel off. We ar' pardos now, ha, ha! Did Steve give you the slip in Tucson?"

"Yes," said Samson, ashamed to say that he had shot at a man and hit a hotel lamp. "He got clear off before I got ready ter operate. Must hev got wind ov yer goin' off, I think."

"Yes; he warn't far behind Jose an' me," growled Silver Belt. "Jehu! Samson; if you had been at Rock-Dust when he came we might hev corraled him. You struck our trail whar?"

"In ther mountains back o' ther camp—saw it goin' north, an' I thought I'd find yer up hyer seein' how Red Chick carried out his part o' ther programme."

"Like a traitor!" like an Injun!" cried the Tucson sport, his mind flying back to the Apache's treachery. "By ther eternal! ef I hed hyer ten men I could name, I'd go back an' clean out ther red buzzard's nest."

"What! did Rolfo git away?" cried Samson.

"Got off by promisin' Red Chick a huge ransom. I could hev blown ther traitor's brains to ther winds, an' would hev done it ef I hedn't been in the heart ov his camp."

"Say; let's go back."

"No; not to-night," said Silver Belt, cooling down. "We must strike the trail of the man who got away. He an' Steve must not meet."

Samson was silent for a moment.

"I b'lieve I kin strike the trail," he suddenly exclaimed.

"Rolfo's?"

"I think so. On my way hither I heard a hoss neigh; it war dark, an' I halted an' listened. Arter awhile I heerd ther gallop ov a critter, no mistake, cap'n, an' I leaned forward with my dropper cocked. Ther hoss passed ter windward just out o' pistol-shot, an' I lost 'im."

"Did you mark the spot?" asked Silver Belt eagerly.

"I kin go straight to it."

"Come, then. We leave this nest ov red traitors behind. Our task is ter catch ther man thet rode thet hoss."

"War it Rolfo?"

"It could be no one else."

"But what would he be comin' this way fer, cap'n?"

"This way?" echoed Silver Belt astonished.

"Ther hoss I heard war comin' toward this camp."

"Jupiter!"

"Then it might not hev been Rolfo."

The man from Tucson made no reply. The mystery of the horse heard in the night by Samson seemed to nonplus him to a considerable degree, and his silence lasted until it was broken by his companion's voice.

"Mebbe it war an Apache," he said.

"A stray one, then, for one ov Red Chick's right bowers told me not an hour ago that ther hull band war at home."

"Mebbe ther horseman war Black-Hoss Steve?"

Silver-Belt broke into a laugh.

"If a man who falls a thousand feet through starlight is able ter mount a hoss, then ther man you heard war Steve," he said to Samson. "Wal, we've got ter leave this bizness. Rolfo must be found."

"I'm with yer, Silver Belt. I didn't check Black-Horse Steve in Tucson, but you must hev stopped 'im somewhar."

"I did—at ther bottom ov a canyon. Off we ar', Samson," and the trio moved up the pass again, Feather Frank looking at Samson keenly, and the silver sport puzzled over what the giant had told him about the horse heard in the night.

Samson's ears had not deceived him, for if Silver Belt had crept back into the Indian camp at the foot of the hills, he might have seen a horse enter at the northern confines and carry his rider forward.

"I'm hyer to find an' to avenge," murmured the man in the saddle. "I've got a new lasso, an' I've tied a piece of the old silk to one end, so it is still the silken lariat. If Rolfo lives I will find him; if dead at the hands of the red vultures that came down upon Ranch Robin at Silver Belt's instigation, somebody will push ajar the gates of eternity before mornin'!"

A minute later the speaker halted in the shadow of one of the outer tepees, and instantly horse and man became an equestrian group like one done in bronze. Without the semblance of a sound the man deftly uncoiled the rope that hung from the pommel of his saddle, and continued to survey the ground about him.

If his ears had caught a sound he did not betray it, but he saw the figure of an Indian the moment it advanced across his line of vision.

"Mebbe I'll get some news," mused the horseman. "I've made up my mind to net the first fish that comes along an' yonder's my Apache salmon!"

Up went his hand and with it the lasso that described a noiseless circle about his head, and then shot straight toward the Indian who had halted within reach of the noose. If the hour had been noon the cast could not have been more successful, for the coil settled over the red-skin's head, and he was thrown off his feet and jerked toward the lassoer before he could shriek or defend himself. It was the work of a second, as it were.

"Now, we'll see what news you can give a fellow," chuckled the man with the lariat as he brought the Indian up standing beside his saddle, and held him there by a vise-like grip on his shoulder. "Open your mouth, red," he went on in a whisper. "Don't yell an' rouse this buzzard nest. These tepees ar' not filled just now, eh? No? All right! Whar's Red Chick?"

A flash brightened the mad black orbs of the Apache, and it is probable that he would have given the alarm if the left hand of his captor had not thrust a cocked revolver into his very face.

"The white man has caught Red Chick," he said.

"What! the boss Apache buzzard himself?" cried the lassoer. "By Jupiter! this is luck unlooked for! You Red Chick, the Apache; the red for whose head twenty towns have offered a reward?"

"It is true. The lasso of the pale-face has lassoed Red Chick, the Apache."

"Then I'll get news direct from head-quarters. What have you done with Rolfo, the owner of Ranch Robin? You pounced upon the ranch a few nights since; the gold of one man an' the plunder of the place made up the inducement. Don't shake yer head an' play the innocent dodge, Red Chick. This is no play game. I am hyer on the sternest kind o' bizness. Answer me. What have you done with Rolfo?"

"The white lassoer has come too late."

"Too late, eh?" And the words seemed to drive the revolver closer to the red temple.

"Have you killed him?"

"No. Rolfo is far away on a fleet Apache horse. Red Chick an' him made a trade; he swore by his God, an' the Apache by the Great Spirit."

"Then you betrayed Silver Belt? Oh, you're a treacherous quantity, Injun! For a promised ransom you let Rolfo go, eh? Isn't that about the heft of it?"

The Indian nodded.

"Rolfo, the ranchero, promised to pay Red Chick two hundred ounces of dust for his freedom an' Red Chick let him go."

"You trusted a man whose word will not be broken," said the lassoer. "I will stand surety

for Rolfo of Ranch Robin if he needs any. He is far away now?"

"He rides toward the big city of the whites." "I know! toward Tucson, an' I know, too, whom he seeks thar," cried the man in the saddle. "Between Rolfo an' Black-Horse Steve, Silver Belt an' pards, you'll experience tough times."

Red Chick started at the mention of the Tucson sport's name.

"If Black-Horse Steve had come a little sooner he might have seen the silver sport," he said.

"Silver Belt?"

"Yes, Steve."

"An' he has just left the Apache camp?"

The Indian nodded.

"Gods! set me on his trail, Red Chick! I'll add fifty ounces to Rolfo's ransom. Thar! ye'r not lassoed now, neither does my revolver cover you. Show me the trail of Silver Belt, the planner of all this mischief. You must know which way he went! you do!"

The additional fifty ounces opened wide the eyes of the avaricious red-skin; he seemed to jump at the chance afforded.

"Red Chick will show Steve the lassoer," he said, and he started away at a rapid pace, followed by the man who had boldly entered the red lion's den.

Passing beyond the southern limits of the camp, Red Chick came suddenly upon a young Indian whom he engaged for a few moments in whispered conversation, then wheeled suddenly upon the anxious lassoer.

"Straight ahead through the pass," he said pointing forward. "They cannot be far ahead."

"They?" spoke Black-Horse Steve in amazement.

"Silver Belt an' the white boy," was the answer.

"Ah! I see; he spared Feather Frank."

"An' a big white man who came up from the south an' met 'em in the pass," said the young Apache.

"A big white man? Ah! it must be my old friend, Samson. Good-night, Red Chick!" and away dashed Black-Horse Steve.

CHAPTER XIV.

STEVE AND ROLFO.

SOMEHOW or other, fate it was, perhaps, Black-Horse Steve lost the trail to which he sprang so eagerly by Red Chick's direction.

Down through the pass he went, through the wild, rough country that lay beyond, and out into the region of rich grama grass and fine grazing lands that lay south of the red-skin camp. All the time he held one hand on the lasso carried in readiness at his side, and his senses were kept in tension and always on the alert.

At last he lessened the speed of his horse, and let the animal blow among the luxuriant pasturage.

Black-Horse Steve had missed his man.

Somewhere, perhaps, along the trail Silver Belt and his companions had turned off, and the man with the lasso had missed them. Daylight broke and found the persistent hunter riding on, he and his horse, the only living objects visible in a vast expanse of country.

"So Rolfo is at large!" he exclaimed, speaking his thoughts aloud. "It must have galled him to swear a ransom to the red devil who burned Ranch Robin an' murdered Chique, the faithful old servant! I'll wager my boots that when he has paid his ransom he'll pay Red Chick for his devilry. An' I will help him! By heavens! I should have choked the Apache serpent to death last night; but no! I'll leave that duty to Rolfo. Rosa is safe in Rock-Dust. The rough pards will treat her as she deserves to be treated—like a lady! They're a hard set but they're human. They said they'd give me a good horse with which to hunt Silver Belt an' they have; but this animal isn't like my old black."

On, on went Black-Horse Steve across the grama valley, and with his face turned toward Rock-Dust, miles and miles away.

Suddenly he started and shaded his eyes with his left hand.

"It war no coyote in the grass—no valley jackal," he said. "To me it looked like the head of a man. I saw it but a moment, but—thar! A man by Jupiter!"

The object which had attracted the sport's attention appeared among the grass some distance away, and almost straight ahead, and Steve's keen eyes had made it out to be a man.

"A white wouldn't be in this part o' the kentry without a hoss!" he went on, watching narrowly the spot where he had seen the object last.

He put up his lasso as he finished speaking, and drew and cocked a revolver of the largest pattern, a weapon placed in his hands by Noisy Dan just before quitting Rock-Dust.

"This'll put us on an equality, I guess," he smiled, riding slowly toward the man in the grass.

He reached a spot about thirty yards from the stranger, when all at once a man rose among the grama grass and threw up his hands.

"Rolfo!" fell from the horseman's lips, and then giving his steed the spurs he landed at the man's side in three seconds.

"Stephen!" cried the fine looking though dark-faced man who grasped the Arizonian's hand in transports of joy. "This is luck unlooked for. You have been North?"

"Into Red Chick's coop. What's yer hoss?"

"I have none."

"But you left Apache land mounted?"

"Yes, an' on a good horse, too. Last night he ran off at the hiss of a snake in the grass, an' I was on the ground helpless before I could prevent. You can't trust an Apache horse any more than you can one of the red-skins."

"Thet's gospel, Rolfo," said Black-Horse Steve. "Thank fortune, I have found you. This horse will carry double. Get up an' we'll break for Rock-Dust."

"Why Rock-Dust?"

"Because Rosa is thar."

An exclamation of happiness burst from Rolfo's throat.

"Rosa in good hands? thank heaven!" he cried. "She was taken from me the night after Red Chick and his infamous pards swooped down upon Ranch Robin and blotted the happy old place from existence. She was taken off by two white thieves painted as Indians."

"Samson and Gila Jose!"

"You know them, Stephen?"

"I have that distinguished honor," smiled the lassoer. "One of them is in a bad fix at present I fear."

"How so?"

"He tumbled a thousand feet through starlight an' struck a bed o' stones."

"Did you do it?"

"Yes; I couldn't help it, Rolfo," was the answer. "He did me a favor; he supplied Rosa and I with a lasso, which meant freedom, an' I war ungrateful enough to throw 'im down ther canyon wall."

Rolfo made no reply, but looked far ahead in a thoughtful manner, all the while closely watched by the handsome man in the saddle. They were moving slowly through the grass, and Rolfo was walking beside the horse.

Any observer could have told that these two men were brothers; they had the same physique, the same piercing black eyes, and their voices had the same sound. Rolfo was the oldest, but not the best known.

Few men in Arizona knew that they were brothers, and fewer still knew the history of the three brothers—Felix being the third—who had come to the territory from California some twelve years before.

When Rolfo spoke again it was to give Black-Horse Steve a succinct account of the destruction of Ranch Robin at the hands of Red Chick and his pards. The story was told to the minutest particulars, and Steve listened without letting a word escape.

He had heard the same story from Rosa's lips, but he wanted to hear it from Rolfo's.

"Ah! don't I know in whose brain the whole infamous scheme was born!" cried Rolfo, showing a pair of mad eyes to Black-Horse Steve. "I saw his hand in it the moment the cyclone burst over the ranch! And I said to myself: 'If I live, Silver Belt, I'll pay you for this!' I have lived, Stephen, and I will pay the king of villains!"

"And pay Red Chick his ransom?"

"Yes, and choke the red snake before he counts the money!"

"You're not goin' to leave any thing for me," laughed Steve. "I want to do something."

"Lasso Samson. You say the fellow shot at you and hit the lamp before the Crystal Palace in Tucson? A poor marksman like that ought to be lassoed!"

The lassoer laughed, but made no reply.

Thus for several miles the two brothers went southward through the grass following the slight trail that ran ahead of them like a cattle path, Rolfo frequently expressing his joy at Rosa's safety, and Steve as frequently assuring him that she was in excellent hands.

The sun came up, and passing his meridian station, went down the western sky. It was a long trail to Rock-Dust, and the brothers were

fated to reach it in the night and so late that even the one whisky den of the camp had closed for the night.

"Do you want to see Rosa to-night?" asked Black-Horse Steve.

"Yes. She will pardon me for disturbing her, and I cannot wait till morning. Do you know her quarters?"

The lassoer had seen Rosa assigned to a certain cabin, but in the dim starlight, he could not pick it out from among the many similar ones that surrounded it, and was for a moment at a loss how to reply.

"I'll try it," he said. "If I recollect aright, it was the tenth cabin from the southern terminus of this street. We'll count 'em an' see."

This task did not occupy any time to speak of, and Black-Horse Steve rapped on the door of the tenth shanty.

"Thet's right! wake a fellar up jest when he's bu'stin' a bank at dream-keno!" growled a noisy voice as the door was opened and a man and a revolver made their appearance. "Who wants Noisy Dan?"

"Black-Horse Steve an' a man he found at the North."

"Jehu! Silver Belt, eh?"

"Not quite, Noisy Dan."

"Not Rolfo?"

"Rolfo it is!"

Noisy Dan gave utterance to an exclamation calculated to rouse the the soundest sleepers, and leaped across the threshold to seize Rolfo's hand.

"You want to see Rosa, eh? Ov course! Bless ther daisy's heart! she war talkin' ov you at sundown. I'll jist rap 'er up; kinder break ther ice, yer know."

Noisy Dan walked to the third cabin from his own shanty and rapped on the closed door, and received no response.

"Sound asleep!" he cried. "I'll try ag'in; mebbe—Hello! ther door's ajar."

Dan's discovery seemed to throw a gleam of apprehension into the brother's eyes.

"We'll peep in on ther daisy," he went on, striking a match.

A moment later he thrust his head into the cabin with the lucifer blazing above it only to startle the brothers with a cry.

"Heavens! ther shanty's empty!"

"Rosa gone!" cried Rolfo and Steve bounding into the place.

"Look an' see, gents. Looks to me as if thar's nobody in thar."

"Gone she is," grated Rolfo starting back to face his astonished brother. "Well, Stephen, they beat us to Rock-Dust. That's all thar is of it."

"Who beat you, gents?" queried Noisy Dan.

"Silver Belt an' Samson."

"Jewhizzer! you don't give me thet game, eh? Then I'll rouse ther natives!" And leaping back into the starlight, the noisy man of Rock-Dust let slip a yell that opened thirty cabin doors.

CHAPTER XV.

SILVER BELT AND HIS PRIZE.

"WHAT'S ther matter? Look inter thet empty cabin!" said Noisy Dan to the inquisitive men who rushed from their cabins and half-dressed but well-armed stood before him. "Hang me fer a Celestial! ef thet card-sharp an' pard hev'n't invaded Rock-Dust while we slept, an' waltzed off er got off somehow with ther bird. Thet empty cage tells ther hull story. I'm mad enough to chew a lasso. Whoopee! I could whip my weight in wildcats!"

The empty state of the cabin lately occupied by Rosa was discovered before Noisy Dan concluded, and the miners had turned to the two brothers for an explanation, which Rolfo gave in as few words as possible.

"We need no help, gentlemen," he said calmly when he finished. "It is our trail an' we intend to follow it to the end."

"You an' Black-Horse Steve thar?"

"Stephen an' I."

The pards of Rock-Dust would have put in a remonstrance had they not seen that the brother-pards were determined.

"We ask two fresh horses, nothing more," continued the owner of Ranch Robin.

"Which ye shall hev, gents!" cried twenty men at once and there was an instant break for the camp corral.

It is needless to say that two of the best horses belonging to the camp were speedily placed at the disposal of the two men, nor that the favor was gratefully accepted.

"Come," said Rolfo to Steve. "The silver buzzard has a good start of us, no doubt, but

this chase is not to end this side of him. Remember that!"

Five minutes later two men strangely alike and both splendid riders left the mountain-camp, and side by side galloped south.

Did the two brothers know where to look for Silver Belt and his captive? Had they already struck the trail of the silver sport?

Meanwhile, riding southward, but far, far in advance of Black-Horse Steve and Rolfo, were four persons, two men, a boy and a young girl, the latter placed between the men and watched by them as with the eyes of hawks. The boy rode beside the man on the girl's left, a veritable giant in strength and physique.

Feather Frank, for the boy was the youthful Rock-Duster, could have told a story of daring and cunning lately done by one of the men; how he had entered Rock-Dust where discovery for him meant death, how he had slipped up the darkened street and boldly glided into the cabin that contained the Rose of Ranch Robin; and how he had carried her away, out from under the very noses of the miner pards.

He had not seen all this for he had been guarded by Samson during its occurrence, but he knew it had happened, for Silver Belt's return with the amazed girl was proof enough.

Not for a moment since his captive by the silver sport had the vigilance of his guardians been relaxed; he had journeyed to the land of the Apache raiders and back, had ridden miles at Silver Belt's side, and all the time had watched for a chance to break for liberty, but all the time had he been thwarted.

And now he was going away from Rock-Dust again, but this time he was near the girl, and he secretly resolved to do something to baffle Silver Belt and his big pard.

"My chance may come this side of Tucson," mused Feather Frank.

"If it should not, I will watch for it within the town. I am not going to be this villain's captive for all time. I will show him at the first opportunity, that I am a dangerous prisoner. He threatens to make me his major domo in place of the boy who serves him at his house now. Well, let him try it! Of course Silver Belt, I will jump at the chance of becomin' your slave. Yes, just try me!"

On, on southward through the night went the four horses that carried the quartette toward Tucson miles away.

Feather Frank never ceased to watch his chance, but it did not come. He saw the silver-mounted pistols that shone in the belts of the two men and looked in dismay at his own helpless condition.

"He was afraid to arm me," said Frank, eying Silver Belt. "The coolest headed and most fearless man in Arizona would not trust a boy with a revolver."

Day, breaking at last, found the four riders nearing a stream that wandered lazily through the luxuriant pasture lands before them; they saw the many trees that reached almost to the water's edge, and entered the grove at a slow canter.

The well-blown horses hailed the crystal tide with many expressions of equine delight, and were soon drinking greedily in the middle of the stream.

"Do you know whar we ar', boy?" asked Samson, turning suddenly upon Feather Frank.

"It is Crystal river."

"Then, you've traveled this trail afore?"

"I have."

"What d' yer say, Rosa? You know this river?" And Samson looked at the beautiful creature still mounted between him and Silver Belt.

"Yes. It flows near Ranch Robin, though far north of this point," was the answer. "I know Crystal river well."

Silver Belt glanced at Samson and shook his head, which caused the giant to keep back the other questions bubbling to his lips.

"I ask you for the last time to take me back to Rock-Dust," said Rosa, suddenly turning to the silver sport. "You have struck deep enough now. I see through your plan, and I tell you here, for the last time, Silver Belt, that, though you play this game through, you cannot win it."

"What do you mean, girl?" asked Silver Belt. "What game do you refer to, an' who's playin' it?"

Rosa smiled cynically and answered with spirit:

"I do not speak in puzzles. You know, Silver Belt. There can be but one outcome to this game—failure for you! You play it with blood on your hands. I can never be your wife. The fate of Ranch Robin and the captivity, if not

the death, of Rolfo stand between us and that consummation!"

Silver Belt, who was gazing into Rosa's face as she spoke, burst into a boisterous laugh.

"We'll let the future take care of that, girl!" he exclaimed.

"Dare you take me to Tucson, where Rolfo is well known and where my name has been spoken many times?"

"Who's mentioned Tucson?" laughed Silver Belt. "A man o' my stripe has more homes than one. Tucson, Rosa? We're not likely to see Tucson this journey."

Feather Frank, who had been watching the girl narrowly, saw her countenance fall as if hope had been suddenly extinguished.

"You will not take me back?" she said, still addressing the silver sport.

"Not to-day!" with a chuckle. "I've played many a game afore, my ranch rose, but never one in which the stake was so precious. Rolfo was always my enemy. I hated him from the moment you fell into his hands, and of late years he seemed to know it. Still, I was merciful. I told the Indians not to harm a hair of his head—"

"But you knew the infamy of Red Chick!" interrupted the girl, her eyes flashing.

Silver Belt's brow darkened; yes, he had discovered the Apache's infamy; he had released Rolfo for a ransom, but the girl knew it not.

"Rolfo may not be alive to pay you for all this pretended mercy; but there is another," Rosa went on.

"Black-Hoss Steve, eh? All right! I thought I had finished him when I cut the black lasso that lowered him over the cliff, but fortune helped the lasso sport an' his hands caught on the threshold of the cave as he went downward. It was one chance in a thousand, an' Black-Horse Steve got it. No; my daisy; Silver Belt is not afraid of the Mounted Mystery, as some call this man. When I have taken you to a place of safety, I will hunt him. Turn about is fair play, eh?"

"It is considered so in Arizona; but it remains to be seen who hunts last," was the answer.

"Don't I owe the lasso sport one, too?" ejaculated Samson. "By Jupiter! I feel his lasso at my throat whenever I think of him. Ther next time I shoot, I'll not break a hotel lamp!"

By this time the horses had quenched their thirst, and were urged toward the southern bank of the stream, a bank which was rather precipitous and somewhat difficult of ascent.

As the steeds toiled bravely up toward the level land above Feather Frank's horse was suddenly jostled against Samson's and the limbs of the twain touched.

Then, for the first time, the boy saw his opportunity and seized it.

All at once his hand shot toward one of the exposed revolvers in the giant's belt, and in a second he had it in his hand.

"Give up thet dropper, boy!" roared Samson, wheeling upon the young Rock-Duster who had reined in his horse so as to fall a yard behind. "You can't play a drop game hyer!"

"I can't, eh, Samson?" was the quick retort. "Throw up your hands, gents, both of you, an' let Rosa turn her horse an' ride back to me, or I'll send a bullet whistling through your brains!"

It looked for a moment as though the boy's sudden action would result in success, but he had mistaken his ability to cover two desperadoes at once.

Samson ground his teeth and let slip a big oath, but Silver Belt acted.

Quick as a thought, almost, his revolver leaped from his belt and went off before it was half-raised, and before Rosa's hand could be interposed.

"That's what he gets for playin' a bold hand!" said the silver sport as Feather Frank threw up his hands and fell backward from the horse without a cry!

Rosa saw Samson reach for his revolver for a shot at the boy rolling down the bank.

"If you dare!" she cried clutching his arm.

"Shoot that boy, an' I'll call you to account!" The giant hesitated and put up his weapon, and the next minute three persons instead of four rode on.

CHAPTER XVI.

SAMSON HALTS THE WRONG MAN.

"THIS is not one of the misses that is as good as a mile," said the youth, who got upon his feet with difficulty near the clear waters of Crystal river, toward which he staggered with

blood streaming down his face. "I owe you a deadly one for this, Silver Belt, if I ever recover. You took a snap shot an' hit me, but I'm not dead, though winged for a time, perhaps."

It was an hour after the shot that tumbled Feather Frank from Black-Horse Steve's steed, and it is safe to say that Silver Belt, Samson and Rosa were far from the spot.

Frank had fallen almost into the water, bullet-grazed and bleeding, and not until he had bathed his hurt with the clear fluid, did he know the extent of his injury. Then he saw that he had had a very narrow escape from death, thanks to the hastiness of Silver Belt's snap shot, for the ball had plowed through the flesh that clothed one of his temples, and had tumbled him senseless from the horse.

Having washed the wound, he clambered to the top of the bank, and gazed southward with much eagerness. But not a glimpse could he catch of the Tucson sport and his big pard; they had vanished from sight, and were doubtless riding fast toward the new abode of which Silver Belt had hinted to the girl.

Afoot and weak, in the Crystal river region, which he knew was far from Rock-Dust, Feather Frank was on the verge of despair. The black horse belonging to the lassoer had probably followed Silver Belt away, as he was not to be seen—a misfortune which the boy greatly regretted.

"What's to the north for me?" asked Frank turning about and looking across the river and far beyond. "What's that I see? Two horsemen, by heaven! An' they are ridin' straight toward me too!"

Beyond the trees which dotted the opposite bank of the stream the overjoyed boy could see the two objects which swung along over the grass, and which came forward in a manner that proclaimed them swift steeds. If the river had not been before him, he would have hastened forward to meet the riders who sat in the saddles, but he was obliged to stand on the bank and wait for them with bated breath.

Nearer and nearer they came and the moment they broke through the timber, Feather Frank took off his cap and sent up a loud cry.

"Steve, I know," he said. "An' the other must be Rolfo."

The horses that dashed into Crystal river carried their riders across and up the bank to the boy who waited for them with undisguised eagerness. Frank sprung between the men and looked at Black-Horse Steve.

"Left you winged behind, eh?" cried the lasso sport. "They will beat us to Tucson, but we'll find 'em thar, Rolfo!"

"Anywhar," was the reply. "I'm not particular, so we find 'em!"

"Not to Tucson," exclaimed Frank; "Silver Belt told Rosa she was not to see that town. He said he has more homes than one."

"More than one?" echoed Steve, glancing at his brother. "What do you know about this?"

"He owns a ranch just over the line; he has owned it for years, though it ostensibly belongs to the man who inhabits it."

"He is thar!" said the lassoer, confidently.

The horses that were sadly blown, for they had been urged with unwearied zeal from Rock-Dust by the two brothers, had to be rested, and it was decided to rest them on the bank of Crystal river.

"Look yonder!" suddenly exclaimed Feather Frank. "Isn't that a horse comin' toward us through the grass?"

Black-Horse Steve fixed his eyes on the object pointed out by the boy, and exclaimed:

"A hoss! An' he canters like my black! Ah! if he be the old pard, this hunt will soon be on ag'in!"

For five minutes the solitary horse was eagerly watched by the trio, and as he suddenly swerved to the right just beyond hearing distance, Black-Horse Steve leaped to saddle, and uncoiling a lasso, started in pursuit.

Rolfo and Feather Frank watched him with unflagging interest, and both uttered an exclamation of delight when they saw the lone and riderless horse respond to the lassoer's shout and approach him.

Sable-Horse Steve came back to the little camp waving his hat above his head, and shouting his enthusiasm.

"This is pot luck!" he said, halting before Rolfo and the boy.

"It's now a hossapiece an' I kin guide the best piece o' hoss-flesh in Arizona. I go at once; you two kin follow when yer animals hev rested."

Rolfo started.

"You follow alone?" he cried.

"Alone! I kin see the trail in the grass. It's a road ter Black-Hoss Steve, Rolfo."

"But remember Ranch Robin"

"Remember Felix!" grated Steve, once more on the back of his famous black horse, fresh, and apparently eager to carry him away.

"We'll not be far behind you," said Rolfo, who saw that his brother could not be restrained. "I strike for Ranch Robin an' Felix, you for Felix alone."

"But my blow will smite as hard as yours!" and then with a shout the lasso sport gave the black horse the spur and left Rolfo and Frank on the river-bank.

Steve seemed to disappear like a shaft shot from a Pawnee bow; Rolfo and the boy watched him out of sight, and then turned to their still fatigued steeds. They saw that while the horses might be urged forward they were yet in no condition to make good headway, for the ride from Rock-Dust had almost exhausted their powers.

If they could have followed Black-Horse Steve with their eyes, they would have seen how faithfully he hung to the trail that ran southward for a few miles, and then struck off suddenly to the left.

"Rolfo is right!" the lassoer said. "Silver Belt heads for the secret ranch across the border."

"Across the border," meant within the confines of New Mexico, a region with which Black-Horse Steve was thoroughly familiar, though he had not known that Silver Belt owned a big ranch there.

More than once he looked back with a satisfied smile; Rolfo and the boy were not in sight, and his horse was still eager and fresh. He had hunted before astride the magnificent black steed, had followed raiding Indians and white offenders over miles of plains and pasture-lands, and he knew the endurance of the animal.

The sun went down on the lassoer pressing steadily down the trail that led toward the border; its last rays saw Black-Horse Steve still unfatigued in the saddle, with the brim of his sombrero blown back and fire in his eyes.

Far, far behind him two trailers were pressing forward—Rolfo and Feather Frank.

All at once, just after Steve had entered the last mountain-pass that intervened between him and New Mexican soil a savage "Halt!" reached his ears, and there loomed between him and the faintly-lighted sky ahead the figure of a giant on horseback.

"Throw up yer hands, Black-Hoss!" followed the command. "This time thar's no hotel lamp fer me ter smash. This ain't Tucson, but Freeze-out Mountain, an' I'm ther quintessence ov Tartarus!"

Steve knew both the voice and the figure. Nobody who ever saw Samson could forget him. He had taken the lassoer by surprise; he had fallen behind at Silver Belt's command, probably to guard the lost pass.

The Arizonian had a brief time in which to act. He saw the revolver gripped in the big hand of Silver Belt's giant pard.

"What's yer choice—hands up, er death?" demanded Samson, mercilessly.

The answer came in an unexpected manner. The black horse shot forward with the vehemence of a stone thrown from a catapult, and the lassoer had dropped forward out of sight! All this in the space of a flash!

"Jehu!" cried Samson.

The two horses did not meet but grazed in the pass, and the coil of a black lasso was forced over Samson's head as Steve's steed shot by.

The big pard was jerked from the saddle with a half-smothered cry as the rope shut off his breath, and the following moment he went down the pass at the lasso's end and behind the black steed's heels!

"No, Samson, this isn't breaking hotel lamps!" smiled the man who looked down from his saddle at the end of the pass. "If you had it ter do over, you'd halt Black-Hoss, with a leaden command, eh?"

The coup of the lasso had proved terribly successful, and when Black-Horse Steve rode on, the giant lying across the trail behind had a broken neck!

It was another blow for Felix!

CHAPTER XVII.

FOR FELIX.

"CAP'N thar's a horseman before the house."

"What's he like?"

"He's a big, fine-lookin' pard."

"Dark-faced, with long hair?"

"No."

The man addressed as "Cap'n" sprung from the cot where he lay and started toward the door.

"Mebbe Samson isn't outside," he was saying, when, crash! the door was flung wide and the man just announced leaped into the room.

"Jehu! Black-Horse Steve!" cried Silver Belt.

"Yes, or Felix's brother—just as you wish ter style me," was the answer. "I am hyer, cap'n, on the best hoss in Arizona, an' with a lasso that has silk ribbons at one end. Stand over in yon corner, sir!" to the man who was announcing his arrival to the silver sport when he burst into the room, and the command was tremblingly obeyed. "This isn't Rock-Dust, Silver Belt. The boy isn't hyer ter interfere. What's yer choice o' weapons on yer own ground?"

Steve had taken Silver Belt completely by surprise. He had come when least expected, had ridden up to the house in the first flushes of morning, and with the audacity of Satan himself, had forced his way into the very presence of the Tucson terror.

There was something more than startling in these two famous men standing face to face in the little room of the hacienda building, both splendid specimens of wild manhood, and the coolest and bitterest of foes.

"I'm hyer principally because Felix died at your command, Silver Belt!" continued Steve. "The man somewhar behind me, an' pushin' this way, wants ter strike for Ranch Robin. Samson won't help yer, cap'n. I choked thet fool to death back in ther path whar ye stationed 'im! It war ther print o' his knee I saw in ther ground beside Felix's cot; that, an' ther empty bottle with ther mutilated label, gave me a clew. You hed ter kill Felix because he war Rolfo's brother; but you spared ther worst o' ther three brother-pards! Now, cap'n; what's yer weapon?"

Silver Belt was unarmed, but his eyes gleamed madly.

"The weapons we did not get to use at Rock-Dust!" he said.

"You need fear no interference hyer, Black-Horse Steve. The man in yon corner is the only guardian ov ther ranch just now."

"All right! Get yer weapon, cap'n."

Silver Belt turned half-way around and laid his hand on a silver-mounted revolver.

"No! I won't fight hyer," he suddenly cried. "I don't fight on Silver Dew Ranch."

"Whar, then?"

"In my house in Tucson."

A smile appeared at the corners of the lassoer's mouth. He saw through the whole game. It was a long distance to Tucson, and Silver Belt wanted chances.

"I fight hyer!" he said.

"But I don't," said the silver sport, coolly.

"It takes two ter fight a duel."

"But only one ter kill," was the answer.

"What do yer call ther man in ther corner?"

"Pepo."

"Then let Pepo count five, or ten just as you like."

"No! I fight only in Tucson."

"Felix didn't get a chance ter fight at all," came madly over the lassoer's lips, and up went his revolver covering the tall figure of the silver sport. "Whar shall it be, cap'n—hyer or in Tucson?"

"In Tucson."

The response was a loud report, and the man in the corner almost bounded to the ceiling as he who had tried the man of the Black Horse too far, fell at the foot of the wall!

"I fight whar I find my man," the lassoer said, coolly. "An' when I find the man who compassed Felix's death I don't care whar he falls. Now, Pepo, you will show me the girl."

There was enough of the sternness which had killed Silver Belt in Steve's eyes to make Pepo, the yellow *attache* of the ranch, leave his corner with alacrity.

"This way, senor," he said, and the two men passed out of the room together.

The sun had not gilded the tree-tops about Silver Dew Ranch, when Black-Horse Steve rode off. At his side, and well mounted, also rode a beautiful young girl, to whom he was telling an interesting and exciting story. The end of the trail had been reached; the death of Felix and the swoop of the human vultures upon Ranch Robin avenged, with the exception of one blow, to be inflicted yet by Rolfo, and Rosa had a right to rejoice.

Long before the sun reached the zenith that day the girl was clasped to the breast of a man who met her in the midst of a plain, and Steve said with a smile:

"I have settled with Gila Jose, Samson, an' ther chief Satan ov all—Silver Belt. Now pay

Red Chick yer ransom, an' add some Arizona interest."

Rolfo laughed as he said:

"It shall be paid!"

Just two months later, to the day, Red Chick, the treacherous red, met Rolfo with the two hundred ounces of dust within a few miles of his own camp. The Apache knew the rancher; he knew too that the ransom would be paid; and it was.

"Thar's yer golden ounces fer my ransom," said the Arizonian. "Now, you pay me fer yer work at Ranch Robin."

The Indian showed his amazement in his look. "Two hundred lashes on yer bare back, Red Chick; a stroke fer an ounce—fair play, yer know!"

In an instant the hand of Rolfo was at Red Chick's throat, and when he was half-choked into insensibility, he was lashed to a handy tree, and the man who sat in the saddle near at hand laid on two hundred lashes with a cutting lasso.

It was a terrible whipping, but it gave the man of Ranch Robin satisfaction.

"That squar's us, Red Chick," he said as he rode off. "Now, keep yer distance from ther new hacienda!"

And the Apache did.

A new ranch soon arose over the ruins of the old one, and the first big occasion that graced it was a wedding, at which Rolfo gave his ward away to a certain late young citizen of Rock-Dust, and the first person to congratulate the youth was the handsomest, and, at the time, the best-known man in Arizona—Black-Horse Steve.

There was no mystery now, for all knew that he was Rolfo and Felix's brother.

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